

Thalia Chaltas

Because

I

Am

Furniture

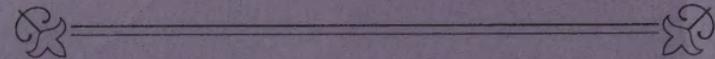
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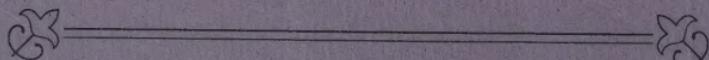
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## ANKE'S FATHER IS ABUSIVE.

But not to her. He attacks her brother and sister, but she is ignored, forced to be an invisible witness in a house of horrors. Believing she isn't worthy of even the worst kind of attention, Anke feels about as significant as the living room sofa. Until she makes the volleyball team at school. In a sport where you have to yell "Mine!" to play the ball, Anke learns for the first time how to make herself heard. As her confidence on the court builds, she finds a voice she didn't know existed. And it's not long before she realizes that if she can make people hear her while she's playing volleyball, then maybe she can be heard at home, too.

Author Thalia Chaltas leads you straight to the heart of Anke's darkly complicated world in this devastatingly powerful novel in poems.



WITHDRAWN

TEEN

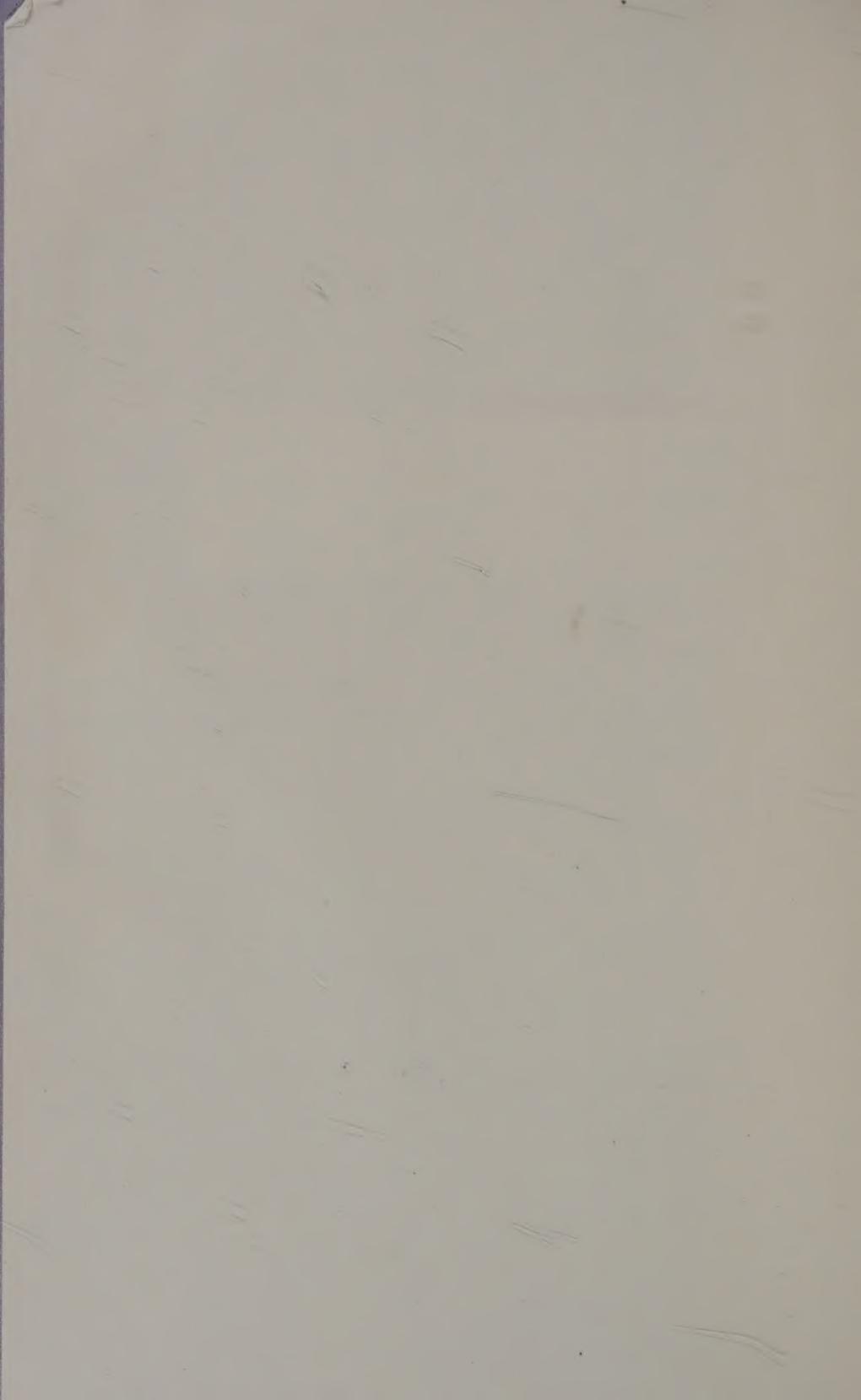
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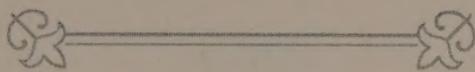
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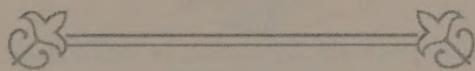


Because

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BY

Thalia Chaltas



VIKING

## VIKING

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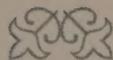
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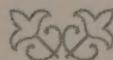
Printed in U.S.A.      Set in Egyptienne      Book design by Nancy Brennan



Only fiction and truth were used in the crafting  
of this book.

To  
my mother  
my brother  
and  
my sister.

I write  
now  
what I could not do  
then.





Because I Am Furniture





PART  
**ONE**





I am always there.  
But they don't care if I am  
because I am furniture.

I don't get hit  
I don't get fondled  
I don't get love  
because I am furniture.

Suits me fine.



When the garage door goes up  
he's home.

We close up conversation  
and scuttle off like crabs  
each to our room—

Shut the door.

Shut the door.

Shut the door.

Mom alone in the kitchen  
where she should be

before the garage door goes down  
and we are locked in hell.



Dinner.

He knocked Darren onto the linoleum.

I don't remember his arm swing,  
just Darren and his chair—  
eight tangled limbs on the floor.

No reason that I could see.

But my father picked up his reasons and his  
plate and went  
to eat  
in the living room.

Darren picked up his chair and himself and we  
are now eating  
in customary ice-age silence.



When I was much younger  
Yaicha and Darren  
would point at my nose  
and say,

"You don't look like us  
your nose is different  
you don't belong."

Yaicha and Darren  
told me that I was  
the mailman's child,

and I got so angry,  
stalking away,  
hot steam in my ribs.

Yaicha and Darren  
told me that I was

the mailman's child

and now I am thinking  
how wonderful it would be  
to have  
the mailman as  
my father.



My mom.

At times I still want to  
sigh,  
curl into her,  
nourish in her motherness,  
especially  
when she wears that  
old suede jacket that  
smells of fall leaves, like  
the pliable leather armchair  
left outside on the back porch.

But she doesn't welcome that.  
Maybe I am not that young anymore.

And when he is there  
all her motherness  
has to be  
spent on  
him.



Oh, yay  
charity day  
visiting Angeline the Wimp.

I see her often enough at school.  
Don't want to visit her house.

Since her dad  
left her and her mousy mother  
for some bouncy secretary in Texas  
mom and I  
are here  
to  
touch base, be friendly.  
Our moms met way back when we were  
in preschool.

Angeline irritates me—  
she's delusional,  
terrified,

weak.

the ocean has "man-eating seaweed"

the garden has "corn-barfing worms"

the fancy sound system has "thought-tracking  
speakers."

I didn't choose to be friends with her.

Angeline doesn't  
have a father around

and my mom says she  
really  
needs one.

Maybe.

But  
not  
like  
mine.



Scrubbing my volleyball knee pads  
while I'm in the shower,  
hot water,  
way too much soap,  
but, man,  
three days of preseason training  
on the sly  
collected a hell of a stink.

The foam won't dry out overnight.

My knees will probably  
froth in soap bubbles  
if I dare set foot in tryouts tomorrow.



First day.

Ninth grade.

High school.

Honking in the parking lot,  
upperclassmen back smacking,  
squeals of recognition,  
a grimly nodding principal.

I'm supposed to feel something more than just  
rattled  
by the sheer number of people in the halls, right?  
Scared?

Except that I've been in and out of  
this building  
a bunch of times for years—  
Yaicha's musicals,  
Darren's debate team.

I learned my classrooms from the map,

and I just spent whole days going to volleyball  
training here,  
so I kind of get it already.

I like school.

Not scared.

But excited in that  
jigging-on-too-much-hot-sauce  
kind of way  
that it's time to  
step out  
of my old framework,  
raw and amorphous,  
to become something I've never thought of  
before.

*After* school is a different story.  
Volleyball tryouts.



I wasn't going to do it.  
Even though I crave it  
I wasn't supposed to  
try out  
because  
my father said,  
"Competition is dangerous for  
a young girl's mind."

But I already like the girls from preseason  
training.

And that tenth-grader Rona saw me  
growing roots  
outside the locker room  
dangling my new volleyball sneakers  
bought with my own money  
in secret.

Rona looked me in the eye.

"You *are* going to put on some shorts, right?"

and as she steered me  
through the splintered wood door  
she told me  
about some player last year  
who tried out with mittens on  
to protect her nylon nails.



And I wasn't even nervous  
because it was the same intramurals coach  
from last year in eighth,

Coach Roy,  
and he had asked me to come  
try out.

Passing drills  
setting drills  
hitting drills—  
he had us try everything  
with a smile  
and a "one more time"  
if we didn't get it right.

I was so full in my skin,  
blood pumping through,  
leg muscles grinding  
as I jumped and sprinted and dove.

At the end we stretched,

happy and sweaty  
and on the way  
to the locker room  
Coach Roy said to me  
“Great job!” like he did to everyone  
but he meant it, too.

He looked right at me when he said it.



Swinging in the hammock,  
    relaxing muscles  
        heavy from tryouts,  
a wild pattern  
of shivering hemlock branches above me  
serrating the sky.

Grasping the nearest twig  
as I swing,  
swing,  
a few striped needles  
come away  
crushed  
in my hand.

Inhaling their sharpness  
I touch one to my tongue,  
swing,  
swing,  
idly wondering  
if this is the hemlock  
people use to poison each other.



He's losing it bad tonight,  
the second time this week,  
chasing Yaicha out of the kitchen  
holding his chair over her head—

she cowers on the living room rug.

I am close behind mom,  
but it's not like I can ever do anything.

No one sees me.

Mom gets him to stop,  
with taut and twisted face, open hands,  
before the chair comes down.

Yaicha runs.

He sits down, tired,  
and says to mom,

"I'm sorry you had to see that."

Inevitable that he does it.

But he doesn't really want  
a witness.



Lying in bed,  
I am thinking that it's unfathomable,  
why his anger begins  
or why it ends.

There was that time  
He woke us all up  
at two a.m.  
to go out in the street to see  
the aurora borealis,

a magical flickering green spirit  
dancing against the black sky  
with us underneath it,  
and I thought we were suddenly  
a family,  
woven,  
peaceful.

But when we went back in  
there was a raccoon in the open garage—

scuttling scared  
on concrete—

and my father laughed and  
shut the garage door,  
roaring to send the animal  
ricocheting off the rakes in the corner  
in terror,  
frantic for escape.

My father trapped the raccoon for the night.

Not one of us said  
anything against it.

In the morning  
he told Yaicha  
to clean up the curling round of  
raccoon shit,  
cold on the  
garage floor.



The foam cushions  
on the old couch downstairs  
disintegrate  
daily  
in a hush,  
like each of us,

small flecks of  
hardening puffs  
raining mute to the floor  
when I flop down to study.

And the more the couch gets used,  
the less foam it keeps—

someday  
just an uncomfortable  
frame,  
springs and other inner workings  
exposed.

Silent.



Of course a full hallway.  
I stub my sneaker  
on the kid's heel  
and we tumble like  
bowling pins,  
three of us,  
books broadcast  
underfoot.

Dammit!

I am seventeen shades of crimson,  
spitting epitaphs:

"Here lies the girl  
whose feet grew  
their own brains  
and threw the rest of her  
over a cliff  
in front of everyone  
she'd ever known."



They call us

Nopes

the "out" crowd,  
we don't fit their  
dog-show guidelines  
wealthy-beautiful.

We call them

Yups

they have to  
all agree,  
yup each other  
every day on every thing.

And we say

Nope, don't

want any part

of your Yuppitude

so tight  
society will burst  
with any change

of thought.

But being a fractured, momentary gathering  
and not an actual collective,  
we say

Nope  
individually  
with scrambled cadence

and their  
Yup  
is way  
louder.



Those girls  
over there  
with Ginger Khan  
know everything  
about each other

guys  
music  
toothpaste  
bra size

everything.

Look at them  
huddle,  
hunching their shoulders  
so I can't see in.

So into themselves  
they don't get it,  
I don't want them  
don't want  
to know the day  
their PMS starts,

don't want  
to tell anyone  
everything  
about me.



"The whole *day*?" I whine.

Mom is driving with gloved fingertips.  
I scraped frost off the windshield this  
morning.

"Anke, her mother may as well make the most  
of her time in Boston.  
I'm sure you and Angeline will find plenty to  
do."

Right.  
Me and Ange.  
Whoopin' it up.

My nostrils snort  
twin fog blurs on my window.

Mom glances over.  
"It's Saturday, maybe Yaicha would take you

two to the mall?"

I snort again.

"Perfect, Mom.

I hate shopping,

Angeline is terrified of Yaicha,

and Yaicha is not about to agree to play  
chauffeur and babysitter."

I glare at the coming stop sign.

Mom sighs.

Honda brakes engage with rhythmic squeaks.

"Honestly, Anke. Your attitude is part of the  
problem."

I grind my teeth.

Wheels grind over gravel to a halt.

Red octagon, looming in my window.

"Sorry, Mom, but somehow I resent having a  
frickin' playdate at the age of fourteen."

Left turn onto Harper Street.

Angeline's street.

Mom taps the wheel gently with a lambskin  
thumb.

"Is she so awful, really?"

I push a breath through my lips.

Is she? Awful?

"She's fine.

But fine doesn't mean she's a friend, either."

And I don't get a choice.



"You use *that*?" Angeline squeals.

What, she's never split wood?

My shoulders are warm.

I've been at this for fifteen minutes already.

She perches on the edge of the porch to watch,  
nestled in her fluffy parka  
like a lost tropical bird,  
knees together.

Swinging the split maul overhead,

upper hand sliding down the shaft,  
the edge lands  
*CRACK* into the oak standing on end.

Blade stuck in the rippled grain,  
I lift the whole shebang, maul and log,  
and whack it on the stump base.  
*CRACK.*

Swing,

*CRACK.*

Perfect thirds.

"Why don't you let Angeline try?"

How long

has my father been standing behind us?

"Oh! Oh, I don't think I could swing that  
enormous thing!"

Silently, he hands me the heavier ax,  
takes mine.

Hands on Angie's hands,  
he first demonstrates the swing  
as he did for me years ago,  
Angie squirming, giggling.

Vessels in my heart burn,  
and I turn back to my work.



Jed has wavy dark hair  
eyes the ink of night  
beautiful cheekbones  
lean in jeans  
a tilted smirk.

He lives across the street.

He says he likes me because  
I just want to be friends

and I do want to be his friend  
because that makes me  
someone  
different  
from all those girls  
who are dying to be more.

But no one knows  
we take naps on his  
damp  
basement couch

after school  
and sometimes he kisses me there.

It doesn't mean anything  
to either one of us—  
he's a senior, after all—  
but  
he doesn't do it  
with anyone else, either.



Final cut for volleyball,  
still a mixed  
carton of eggs,

cliques of chicks  
all primped  
bouncing  
blue-and-gold hair bows  
and Barbie-smooth legs,

lonely homelies  
all pimpled  
slouching  
asparagus legs drowning in  
their brothers' shorts.

But quickly quickly  
Skill  
Promise  
and  
Team Spirit

sliced through,

sniggering girly-girls  
scrambled  
with the rest of us  
into a  
glorious quiche  
of mutual grins.

And as we clapped and whooped at the end,  
some leftovers stood on the rim

but I am daring to be hopeful.



Trotting along the sidewalk,  
salty and tacky with sweat,  
I reek!

I reek with possibility.

Volleyball.

We won't find out results for a few days,  
but right now,  
bouncing through the neon blast of sunset,  
I reek,  
and  
nothing can stop my grin.

Not even going home.



My Father,  
Who Art Not in Heaven,  
and never will be,  
sometimes  
doesn't come home  
from work  
until two a.m.

and for his own reasons  
goes to my sister's room

before he goes  
to his own bed.

I don't want to  
hear  
know  
live here.

I am scared for her

but I am so glad

he doesn't

come to my room.



Yaicha is named after a song  
by some group from the last century called the  
Pousette-Dart Band.

Something about a girl,  
a candle in the falling rain  
shining amidst the pain.

I kind of surprise myself  
when I can picture Yaicha as that candle.

My father named Yaicha after the "haunting  
melody."

I wonder if he ever listened  
to the lyrics.



I imagine living in  
just the bathroom,  
how I would make the bathtub my  
bed at night,  
a little Coleman stove to cook on,  
toilet, running water,

wouldn't ever have to leave that room.

All my needs in  
one  
small  
space.



Some kid  
slams me into a locker  
as he crashes through the crowd,  
actually lays a hand on the side of my head  
to get me  
out of the way.

I lean against the locker a second,  
fumble my French book,  
trying to look like  
I had intended to land there,

and this tall blond guy from the soccer team  
Kyler  
stops briefly with a light hand on my arm  
to say,  
"Okay?"

When I nod  
he winks at me  
and takes off,

but I seem glued to the cold metal door,  
my flushed face turned  
to follow his shoulders  
weaving through the waning rush.



ImadeitImadeitImadeitImadeit  
ImadetheTEAM!

I am airplaning to the school bus  
laughing

screaming

choking

whooping

I don't care

ImadeitImadeitImadetheTEAM!



I burst into his basement  
yelling about  
making the team—  
Jed smiles  
in that quizzical way,  
a question mark.

He could care less  
about sports.

But he likes me anyway.

He pats the couch,  
gestures to the TV.

*"French Flame's* on," he says.

I snuggle in  
and Jed smiles  
toward the beginning credits.

"Congrats," he says.



Rona is our setter  
on the volleyball team,  
quick-thinking and slippery,  
a fuzzy-haired elf  
with fingers that are  
alien long.

She and her mom rent  
a rickety calamity of a white clapboard house  
on the west side.

She once said  
I can't go over there  
because  
her dad is  
sometimes sober,  
but  
sometimes he's not.

I think we could become really good friends.



All colors of the tortured rainbow  
in succession,  
black  
blue  
purple-red  
yellow-green,

my hip bone,  
Rona's swollen thumb,  
someone's elbow,  
someone else's calf

                  where she kicked herself, for Pete's sake,  
all body parts covered.

Learning to roll for a volleyball  
gracefully  
is painful business.



The ball drops  
to the floor  
between me and Carmen.  
We stand silent,  
    guilty glances.

Coach Roy cups his ear—  
the team stutters,  
"My-my ball-ball-ball!"

He leans harder with his ear  
eyes wider  
eyebrows dancing,

we all yell,  
"MY BALL!"

He points a freckled finger  
and grins—

Emma "MY BALL!"

Carmen "MY BALL!"

Doneesha "MY BALL!"

When he turns to me,

the heat I'm just discovering  
screams,  
"MY BALL!"

Hair on my arms  
stands up  
and about bursts into flame.

My lungs are claiming expanding territory.

This is my voice.

It is MY BALL.



Somehow  
this is worse  
than the normal yelling.

Quiet and earnest,  
he is squatting in front of me.  
I hunch on the couch.

"I know you think you want to play volleyball.  
—*aren't I already?*  
Competition creates nastiness,  
—*dissolves nastiness, you mean*  
a false sense of empowerment,  
an 'I'm better than you' euphoria—  
—*my team is better than yours, maybe*  
believe me, I know.

I wouldn't want you to get caught up in that,  
the hunger for control over others.

When I was young blah blah blah blah . . ."  
—*blah blah blah . . .*

My hearing sinks into a cool, soundless cellar,

my eyes watch his thin lips moving against  
each other in silence,  
and I know  
that Darren and Yaicha were right  
when they once used our father to teach me the  
meaning of the word  
*hypocrite.*

When he finishes his oration with a  
"Do we understand each other?"  
I say,  
"Yes, Father."

—but you didn't specifically tell me to quit.



Darren is named after a dead person.

When my parents were first married,

my father's best friend, Darren,  
died in one of those unexplained car crashes  
where there's only one car involved and no  
bad weather, with the added mystery that  
the passenger was one of my father's female  
students.

She died, too.

Her name was Sarah,  
but she didn't get anyone named after her.



"Will you *stop stepping* all over me?!"  
Darren is yelling,  
whipping the dish towel.  
After dinner cleanup is getting dangerous.

I trip all the time,  
I feel like  
everyone  
shares my body space.

From the kitchen corner  
mom says  
"She's growing, Darren,  
give her some room."

"There *isn't* enough room  
with her around.  
She's like one of those  
twenty-man saloon brawls  
all by herself."  
He slams a pot lid

into the cupboard.

I whisper,  
“There ain’t enough room  
in this kitchen  
for the both of us,  
partner.”

And mom shushes me  
and says I’m not helping anything.



Sinking in my chair  
staring at the carpet  
as he coldly commands  
that the waiter bring him  
another steak,  
the third one,  
well  
done  
dammit  
with  
no  
blood  
inside,  
the silence  
ricocheting  
from table  
to table  
to table,  
appalled eyes  
on my family.

Happy birthday,  
Darren.



Rona has English before me.  
"I aced it!" she exclaims,  
slamming her tray next to mine at lunch.

"You usually do,"  
I say,  
meaning to be admiring—  
she's a great student—  
but she looks hurt and slumps a little.

"You sure look tired,  
it must've been hard," I try again.

Rona steals a salt-and-vinegar chip from  
my plate.

"I was up late studying."

Crunching, she amends that.  
"No, I had finished studying in the afternoon,

but I was still up late.

Because my father was up late with  
his bottles."

Drinking.

My face crinkles in sympathy  
though I don't know what these bottles  
bring out in him.

"Till four thirty this morning," she adds.

Now I'm shocked.

"You didn't sleep till four thirty?"

"Almost five." She rubs her wrist across her  
nose and sniffs.

When she looks back into my eyes  
her lashes seem wet,  
but she's grinning.

"One hour of sleep, and I still aced it!"



I am scrunched in a corner of the cafeteria  
during study hall,  
solving for  $x$ ,

where  $x$  is the number of paleontologists  
who can fit into a bus in Malawi when  
the ambient temperature is thirty-  
three centigrade.

Whaaa?

Actually, I am  
spying  
on Jed.

I see him at home,  
but almost never in school,  
mainly because his senior classes are in the  
west wing.

He is talking quietly  
at the far end of the room

with two friends, one short guy and one petite blonde.

His car keys jangle,  
they scoot out the side door,  
and I feel the rumble of his Mustang.

We can't leave campus during the school day.

None of my business.

But funny to realize  
he's a total stranger to me  
in school.

I look at my calculations,  
and it seems that x equals two paleontologists.

There must be something about  
Malawian buses  
that I don't know.



In English class  
Mr. Simon hands out pins,

QUESTION AUTHORITY  
in brilliant yellow  
to make us think, he says.

I wear it proudly all day  
so people will  
ask about it

but I  
wouldn't  
dare  
wear it home.



Chewing gum  
offends my father's  
sensitive nature.

My mom used to  
stash a small pack  
for herself  
in the uppermost  
kitchen cabinet,  
until once when I was little  
I woke up at six a.m.  
and snuck some to chew  
for the half hour  
before my father got up.

Swallowed it  
to hide the evidence.

He made a big show of smelling my  
breath,  
dangerously, sweetly,  
wanting to know where I got it.

I quaked in my jammies  
but pointed to the cabinet.  
It was the only time  
he ever got really mad at  
mom,  
ranting on,  
denting the fridge when he shoved a chair.  
He called her  
a cud-chewing cow,  
he called her  
stupid  
for having gum where anyone could climb  
from chair  
to kitchen counter  
to fridge top  
to get to it.

And at age five I knew  
that the tears he  
brought to mom's eyes  
he should have  
brought to mine.



I am the only one named by my mother,  
whose name is Anne.

Anke means "little Anne" in Old German  
but mom just loved the sounds,

"Ahn—" like the gentle discovery of  
"—keh" a breath of changing weather.

I like her explanation better than just being a  
diminutive  
of somebody else.



Snippings, pieces, smiles

I pack end-of-summer photos in  
my photo album

the one time we got mom in the canoe—

leaving out the mean shots of  
Darren half drowning me,  
Yaicha smacking me with her  
paddle—

me and mom sitting with toes in the water,  
me and mom cooking fish,

with captions, colored pencil, borders,

a grab at  
a short history of me  
in an impressive package.

I admire it

as I clean up the mess,  
suffused with warmth of creation,

until Yaicha  
walks in, and flips through  
with derisive silence,

and at the end  
says,  
"There are only pictures of you and Mom!"

and I say to myself,  
*Exactly.*



I grab  
a package of six pairs,  
and go find  
Yaicha  
gliding through  
a sea of purses.

She fingers a popular thing  
made from a shower curtain  
see-through  
with lavender and silver fish  
a little smile plays on her mouth.

"They should line them,"  
I say.  
"You fill it with junk  
and no one will  
see  
the fish."

Yaicha surfaces to glare  
and sneer,

"Listen to the  
Fashion Diva!"

pointing at the socks  
in my hand.

But she purchases a purse  
of flowery upholstery  
instead.



Another Saturday of charity.

Angeline and I head for the kitchen  
for a snack.

I open the fridge door  
and poke—  
yum, leftover pasta  
but that seems uncouth to offer her,  
somehow.

Angie lets out a small scream—  
Yaicha is leaning  
slim and silent on the back wall,  
spooning up yogurt.  
Yaicha's expression becomes devilish.  
Uh-oh.  
Scraping the bottom with her spoon,  
she warbles,  
"Helloooo there, Angellllline."  
She licks the back of her spoon

managing to make it a  
threatening gesture.

"Um, hi, Yaicha," Angeline murmurs,  
backing away one step.

My father slips in from the dining room.  
"Ah, the angelic Angeline is with us."

"Oh, hello!" Angie says brightly, turning to him  
in relief.

Yaicha's face slides back to sullen  
as she edges sideways out of the room.

I watch her go,  
wanting to follow.



In the chill evening  
it builds until  
he's raging at Yaicha,  
and I freeze,  
    the flannel cloth of my shirt  
    blending me in with cabinetry.

Cyclone father  
towers above her,  
sucking papers off the counter,  
hand raised with thunderbolts,  
Yaicha crouching  
on flowered linoleum,  
beneath his  
battering  
unintelligible  
roar,

and

shockingly

he's done

and walks out.

Debris swirls to the floor  
around Yaicha,

and since there is nothing to say,  
I put my limbs in motion,  
walking woodenly  
to my room.



When I was, like, five,  
that redhead girl down the street  
used to ask  
if she could come over.

We always played at her house.

Invite someone over?

No.

Nobody plays  
at my house.



“Hey!”

Rona’s yelling down the hallway,  
her ponytail a copper fuzz bomb  
bobbing on top of her head.

As we get closer  
she says,

“The athletic slap,  
not the girly whap!”

and we high-five with a cracking sound  
that makes heads turn.

“Geometry.” Rona holds up her book.

“Algebra.” I grimace.

She shrugs, her lip to the side.  
“All those word problems.  
I think geometry’s easier.  
Doing proofs means you always know

when you're right or wrong."

Smacking my arm  
she heads for class,  
winking over her shoulder.  
"Life should be that simple!"



Rona's humor is sometimes  
inappropriate.

She laughed out loud  
when Jake's  
custom chemo wig  
blew off in the soccer crowd.

She got us  
all giggling,  
but Jake's red face  
around a game grin  
made me feel  
kind of bad.

Rona snorted,  
said  
he probably needed  
a good laugh—  
counteract all that chemo.

Well, it *was* funny.



Our first game tonight,  
at Plymouth High.

Their gym smells wrong.

I'm not nervous.

I'm not nervous.

No, really,

I'm not.

I'm a starting left-side hitter!

Jittered up, jacked up, amped up,

yes,

but

I'm not nervous.

The lights in here are pretty dim.

My god,

is that their team?  
Look at that girl,  
must be six-feet-something tall,  
built like a jackhammer.

Okay.

I'm nervous.



We lost.

We couldn't pass the ball to save our lives,  
and Plymouth just served us  
to death.

Trooping onto the bus to go home,  
we are all choosing  
separate  
seats.

Even Rona and I sit  
apart,  
each replaying  
every bad pass, every hit into the net,  
every instance of not calling "mine."

My temple is against the rattling window,  
eyes on the darkness  
as we pull away from Plymouth High,

but all I see  
is a white ball with blue stripes,  
flying  
out of reach.



"Who's depressed about Plymouth?"  
Coach is standing over our leaden, silent team  
while we stretch at practice.

Every hand goes up.

"What?" Coach Roy asks,  
eyebrows dancing.

"I am," says Rona angrily.

I mutter the same right behind her.

"First game!" he exclaims.  
"Learn from it.  
But that game is over.  
The rest of volleyball starts from here."

We are all looking up at him mid stretch,

our legs in Vs on the floor.

"Start fresh.

Remember we like this game!"

We smile a little,  
glance at each other.

"Are you ready to play volleyball?" Coach Roy  
says.

Slowly, we stand up for our first passing drill.

"Yes."

"I can't hear you!"

"YES!"



I am not very big-breasted.

When I wanted  
to get my first bra

I was growing  
and they hurt  
my father went berserk.

“Do they bounce when you  
run across the street?”

he roared,

No, I said.

“Are men staring at them?”

he roared,

No, I said.

“Then you don’t need a bra.”

My mother didn’t say a word

although she stood there  
with me.

And the next day,  
she bought me a training bra.

I was so proud.  
I looked down at my breasts  
snug in their new stiff bra  
and thought,  
*Pretty soon they'll be so big*  
*I won't be able to see my feet.*

Well,  
I stand by myself at the bus stop this morning,  
looking down in experimentation  
after more than a year of bras.

I can still see my feet.



Heavy hailstorm after lunch.  
I ran outside and stood in it,  
spitting ice stinging my face,  
bitter nuggets on my tongue.

Coming back in,  
gathering my language folder,  
shaking out my hair,  
Kyler watching me  
from his locker down the hall  
then turning to the back stairwell.

Squelching  
sprinting  
up the front stairs,  
I screech to a kneel in front of class.

Retie my wet sneaker  
four  
slow  
times,

hoping I am fast enough.

Kyler has Spanish  
next door  
when  
I have French.

Madame DuPont  
is pursing her fat lips,  
tapping her watch  
in the doorway.



If you don't like the weather,  
wait five minutes.

Post practice  
showered and clean  
I step out to our backyard  
lit by the sun's last rays,  
my palm on the hemlock's trunk.

Ack—I'm smeared with sap,  
the bark oozing,  
shouldn't trees be going dormant  
soon?

Wipe sticky fingers on the dead lawn.  
Now I'm tarred and feathered,  
furry with wilted grass  
and the bitty pinecones  
lying in a thick crunchy carpet beneath

the great tree.

My old climbing tree.

Aha!

I scoop cones into my sweatshirt pouch,  
a bowlful the perfect centerpiece  
for mom's fall stew.

As I step inside, cradling,  
—surprise—  
my father's home early.

He throws a glance at my loot,  
says to mom,  
"Tell her to take that crap back outside  
where it belongs."



"I bought it with my own money."

Yaicha is backed into a corner  
of the hallway,  
held against the doorjamb  
by our father's wrath.

"I will not have you tarting up your face  
like a hooker!"

he thunders,  
throwing her compact of blush  
against a wall.

*But look at her, I want to tell him.*

*She knows how to make it seem natural.*

Yaicha scurries into her room.

He barrels through my shoulder as he  
stomps by,  
and I am staring at

the tiny dent he made in the wall paint.

I pick up the plastic case,  
slipping it into my back pocket  
to give to her later.



It seems I move quietly in the darkened house  
because

Yaicha doesn't hear me  
come to the living room  
as she sinks onto her heels by  
his favorite chair.

I watch her  
open the compact  
draw a fingertip across the makeup  
and  
luxuriantly  
lovingly  
smear a thick pink line low across the fabric of  
the chair back,  
grinning at it wickedly.



I see Yaicha coming toward me in the school  
hallway  
flanked by the two girls she's never without  
  
and I get this funny little flutter inside,  
and my hand leaps up—  
“Yaicha!” I call out,  
veering her way,  
and she sidesteps me with a quick glare that  
glances off my temple  
and buries its blade  
    in the wall  
next to me.

Ah, all is good and normal with the world this  
morning.  
What was I thinking,  
greeting her out in the Social Open?



Kyler is ambling down the hall toward our  
algebra class  
grinning at the antics of some louder  
soccer players,  
in the conversation  
but not being obnoxious.

At the doorway,  
he lets the pack of them cram in before him,  
politely gesturing,  
still smiling.

I watch his tall frame disappear inside.

Suddenly  
Rona is at my elbow.

"Whyoncha say something to him?"

Blushing furiously,

I wipe a hand over my hair.

Rona cocks an eyebrow.

I flip my palm up in exasperation.

"I don't know. . . ."

What would I say?

"He's so . . .

nice."

Rona cackles and whacks my shoulder.

"Yeah, that's a real problem, all right."

And she leaves me  
to walk into algebra  
alone.



I pick at it  
in algebra,  
annoying little white thread,

and in the middle  
of a square root  
it lets go,

my shoulder exposed.

At the bell  
Kyler pokes my skin—  
“New style?”—  
and grins.

I feel his touch  
through lunch  
raw,

charged.

Consider  
picking out threads  
on all my clothes,

the Fashionable  
Open Seam  
Look.

*Struggling with uncooperative jeans  
this morning,  
thinking about yesterday when*

Angeline said she saw that I  
got selected for  
Student Government Day,  
one of twelve students—  
she did, too.

She's terrified  
of course  
    how do we act?  
    should we study?  
like it's terribly important  
or something.

*Not the blue shirt again.  
Is everything I own blue?*

We're just  
supposed to run  
the town meeting,  
visit the water-treatment plant,

pass some laws.

*Should be a law against stains.*

*Is everything I own stained?*

It's kind of an honor  
to be chosen by all your teachers,  
but Angeline's not  
who I want  
to hang out with  
all day.

*Hair in a ponytail? Down? Chop it off?*  
I find her so irritating,  
predictable,  
dull,

okay, *EVERY*thing is  
irritating.

Not just Angeline.



I am supposed to be getting a ride home  
with him,  
but walking down Main Street  
my father greets this pretty woman friend,

and I force a loud sigh,  
the only irritation  
I can safely show,  
knowing  
it will be a while.

I stare at them,  
arms crossed,  
and up walks Angeline  
in some frilly jacket.

“Hey,” she breathes to me,  
adoring eyes on my father,  
who acts all excited  
to see her,  
runs a flat gentle hand

down her back.

Angie's expression is dripping  
with sugar  
as he turns back to his woman,  
and  
my next angry  
exasperated sigh  
farts out  
at Angie.

"Oh, *please*,"

I mutter.

Hurt cow eyes  
reproach me,  
and Angeline sulks away.  
Over her shoulder  
I hear,  
"Your dad is the greatest,  
and you don't even  
know."



As Darren came out  
of the bathroom  
this morning,  
pulling shirt overhead,  
the bruise  
half his side  
glared garish mauve

and I felt  
my  
upholstery  
rip

and bits of fluff  
escape  
to float away

before Darren noticed me and yanked his shirt down.



And yet  
when I was five  
before bed  
he would read to me  
from *The House at Pooh Corner*  
in all the voices—

my favorite was Piglet  
the only time my father had a  
soft  
high  
tender voice  
with Eeyore and Tigger and  
all of Rabbit's friends and relations.

And I really think  
you can't read to someone like that  
without  
a little teeny  
bit  
of  
love.



Mirrors suck.

From the side,  
half-inch plywood  
topped with  
brownish brown hair  
taut in a ponytail  
to give my blemished Roman nose the lead,  
draped in a spaghetti-spotted tee,  
men's Levis  
to keep up with Freakish Leg-Lengthening  
Disorder,  
wooden bead earrings from Yaicha's trash  
two years ago.

Quite a package.

My grandma used to say,  
"Nobody's going to buy you."

Well, that's apparent.



Not listening, but  
hearing  
way too much.

Banging  
beyond the wall  
rhythmic  
numbing  
hypnotizing  
amplifying

He's in there  
hurting her

He's in there  
hurting her.

Hear Yaicha's  
low  
unending  
moan.



Why am I not good enough?

At least he loves  
Darren and Yaicha  
in some way

even if it's horrible,  
he shows them attention

and I am furniture  
I get nothing  
nothing  
nothing  
no  
thing

or  
at times I get  
a knife-edge glimpse of

something scary.

I think that it is supposed to be good,  
that I get less  
from him

but I feel

worth

less.



PART  
TWO







Little packet by Yaicha's bed

I've seen them before—  
Marci takes the pill before school  
laughing in the girls' room,  
proof of her  
extracurricular  
activities

But I overheard Yaicha tell her friend  
she's a virgin,

never even had a boyfriend,

so I don't get it.

And she storms in  
snatches the packet  
raging about privacy.

Bubbling panic  
I go on the offensive—

"Why should *you* take the pill?"

My insides shred  
as she glares a full minute

and I stand my ground  
wanting her to tell me  
tell me  
anything,

but when I see pain  
forming  
on her retinas

I decide I don't want to know.

I run.



Hunched with his calculator  
pencil whispers  
scowling brow

formulaic incantations  
bouncing knee

jutting vertebrae  
like hackles  
on a gravel pit dog.

Darren carves through  
nightly calculus,  
sculpting another perfect grade,

the ice cream I brought him  
two hours ago  
now  
puddling milk.



Darren is down in his room.

Yaicha is cutting through the kitchen.

I am on the edge of the rocking chair by the couch.

Each of us  
a corner  
of an equilateral triangle

equidistant

corner angle spread as far  
away  
from the other two as possible  
without breaking apart

but in that position  
we can't get any closer.

Unless maybe we step together.



Government work again.  
Standing inside the mauve front door,  
waiting for Angie to come down.

Fake flowers.

Silk, I think they call them.  
*Hecho en Mexico*  
makes me doubt any worm wove them.

A little gift card  
anchored under the vase.

IN HARD TIMES FRIENDS ARE THERE.

Plastic ribs on the backs of the leaves.  
Stiff wire stamens inside the  
rigid papery petals.  
A vibrant lily-blue never seen in nature.  
Lemon Pledge-scented.

*Friends Are There?*  
What friend sends false,

when false needs to be dusted?  
What friend sends false,  
when reality  
bends toward light  
nods in a breeze  
feels like butter  
shimmers with amethyst  
smells of jelly beans, tangerines,  
and pencil shavings  
finally wilts and melts so you can throw it  
away and start with something new?

I pull out the fake lily,  
shove it down  
behind the entry table,  
as Angie tromps downstairs.



Third-floor bathroom  
first stall on the left,  
I am squatting  
over the stained toilet seat  
reading the metal walls  
and catch something fresh—

Angeline  
Peachy-keen  
The boys would taste her  
But shes too green

If a glass of milk like Angeline  
gets on a bathroom wall,  
the scrawlers  
must be running out  
of ammo.



In the between-class crush  
I feel a *fwap*  
    sharp and quick  
    on the small of my back  
and whirl  
to catch  
the light wink,  
the tilt of his mouth  
before  
Jed slides to a side hallway  
and away.

I embrace my biology book,  
cheered by  
chance encounter.



Hit-and-runs.

Rona sets the ball

I jump and hit the ball  
(hopefully over the net)  
sprint to the back wall  
tag the wall

run back to the net

where

Rona sets the ball

I jump and hit the ball  
(hopefully over the net)  
sprint to the back wall  
tag the wall

run back to the net

where

Rona sets the ball

I jump and hit the ball  
(hopefully over the net)  
sprint to the back wall  
tag the wall

run back to the net—

The drill is supposed to make you stronger  
but  
I am so tired  
after eight sprints  
I stumble like a drunk  
and can't get off the ground.

"Next victim!" Coach yells.



"No thinking, ladies!  
You are thinking too hard!"

Coach Roy is shaking his head  
at me  
after I take my approach,  
jump with all my might,  
and hit the ball hard  
into the net  
again.

The ball is supposed to go  
over  
the net.

I never realized  
till now  
how hard the brain has to work  
to make the body do what it asks.

Or maybe how hard the body has to work  
to ignore  
the brain.



In psych class

Ms. Taft  
had us draw trees

one tree for the traits  
we get from our  
mother's side

one tree for the traits  
we get from our  
father's side.

My mom's side has  
many branches,  
caring, fair, physical appearance,  
passive, calm-headed under stress.

My father's side has  
more branches,  
athletic, questioning, impatient,  
stubborn, tightwad,

opinionated, controlling,  
quick to anger,  
friendly to strangers

and I stare in terror  
at his massive tree,  
crisscrossing branches.

If all this tree is from mom  
and all this tree is from him  
where do I grow  
my own branches?



In the middle of a nap  
a thought snaps me awake  
and I stare at Jed  
a moment,  
his eyelashes long and still.

He is the same age as  
my brother

—I never thought of this?  
and for a few more  
moments  
I am weirded out,  
like finding out your  
turkey sandwich is actually flamingo  
meat.

But I watch Jed  
asleep,  
and his familiar breathing  
his hand on my hip  
calm me  
and I lay my face again  
on his warm chest.



I love the hardware store  
cool circular blade  
hefty hammer  
greasy smell.

While my father gets what he needs,  
I spend a long time  
running my hands  
through chain-link  
like chain mail  
distraction  
from thinking of

last time we were here

when we ran into Marci,

the Marci with a big chest and blue eyes  
the Marci who's had most of the greatest  
guys

and I had to introduce her to my father.

As she left with her nails or screws or  
something,

I was standing near the front door—  
she leaned in to my ear  
and said, all breathy,  
“Your dad is soooo handsome!”  
with that oozy look in her eyes.

I watched her flick her hair and go,  
leaving me gulping,  
leaning on the rocking display rack of  
jackknives.



His Anger stands alone  
stands erect  
in the  
middle of the room.

We step gently around it,  
a terrifying totem pole  
bristling beaks, pinions, talons.

I can't remember  
when it started  
when firm hand  
    became  
fisted liege  
    became  
feral  
    tyrannical  
    rage  
more important than  
the rest of us,  
but

it didn't used to be this way  
and that  
keeps us tied to him,  
guessing,  
teetering,  
waiting,  
while stepping around  
his Anger  
in the  
middle of the room.



"And then my mother took me to Printemps,  
you know, that makeup superstore?  
And I chose, like, four different shades of eye  
shadow?"

Angeline leans over the kitchen table,  
eager to please me.

I am doing my best not to snore,  
tilting on my chair's back legs.

Her short delicate fingers count off.  
"Let's see, um, Café au Lait,  
April Skies,  
Twinkle Frost,  
and Satin Sheets."

She blushes on that last one,  
as my father moves smoothly into the room.

"Quite becoming on you," he drips  
charmingly,

hand gliding over the back of her chair.

Angie's cheeks flood a deeper shade.

I gape at the man  
gently placing his mug on the edge of the sink,  
smiling his way out again.

Did he just compliment makeup?



I asked Angeline  
about her father  
only once.

She said  
all airy,  
"Oh, he'll leave that  
floozy  
and be back someday soon."

And I thought  
*How old are you,  
that you believe  
that crap?*



I'm on my third burger,  
Rona's on her fourth,  
sprawled in BurgerMeister,  
people-watching  
after practice.

A horrendously large,  
I mean,  
somewhat overweight  
girl from school  
gets the Double Dare with Extra Sauce  
and Rona hisses,  
"Look at those jowls!"

I slap her on the arm  
in shock.

Her lettuce-draped mouth mumbles,  
"Well, so she wants a burger.  
She should at least exercise."

And before I can spit out anything

Rona yells,

"Hey, I hear the wrestling team's got an  
opening!"

When the poor girl turns to look,

her lips a chubby O,

Rona salutes her with a half-eaten burger  
and a serious nod.

My pickle slice slips down unchewed.

Honesty takes a stomach

with one less burger.



The snarl of a motor  
and a quick  
*bronnk* of the horn,  
Jed's blue-sleeved arm saluting me  
as he roars past me through the school lot.

Must have had someone with him.

Didn't offer a ride,  
but  
at least I am wavable.



Relief,  
a breather from Sunday Angie-sitting,  
even if it's on my father's orders.

Stepping into my clogs,  
waltzing slowly slowly out the back door,  
swinging the full ash bucket,  
*shwwwsh*  
*shwwwsh*—

Whatzit called?  
Centripi—something.

*shwwwsh*  
*SHWWWSH!* Too far too slow some ash flies  
out running forward to escape,  
laughing at my own stupidity.

At the compost pile  
dump the bucket,

"Cinderelly, Cinderelly!"  
backing away as a small poof arises.

Twirl toward the house,  
spinning with both hands on the handle,  
empty bucket  
flying in a captive circle.

One last crisp breath—  
step back inside,  
bucket clangng the door frame.

Kicking off clogs  
in the stifling warmth  
I see Angeline and my father leaning toward  
each other over the chessboard.

He's teaching her to play.

He's teaching Angeline to play something  
only  
he and Darren play.



Driving home from food shopping,  
me in the front seat,  
Yaicha in the back,  
I am shocked when  
my father slows to the side  
for a slippery husk of a man  
thumbing a ride.

Just before the guy  
gets in  
next to Yaicha,  
my father says,  
"But young girls should never do this.  
Very dangerous."

Well, first of all,  
I can't drive anyway,  
and Yaicha's got her license  
but who lets her use the car?

Second of all,  
if the guy's an ax murderer

it's very dangerous for my father to  
pick him up, too.

But he's driving smugly,  
sparks of elation on his face,  
enjoying the risk he's taken for us all.

Yaicha scrunches up against the car door  
on her side,  
legs crossed,  
eyes on the pines going by.

The guy grunts  
when he wants out  
up the highway,

the smell of him  
still hunched in the backseat  
till we get home.



Mom's watering wandering Jews

and as I cut through the dining room  
with my usual

cheddar and crackers  
the buffet table biffs me  
in the hip—

I crumple,  
cheese fumbles,

and without turning to me on the floor  
mom mutters,  
"Good Graces,  
slow down.  
That's an antique buffet."



The ancient leather  
wingback chair  
straddles boards on the porch.

I tuck myself  
between the arms  
with Sleator, Asimov, Sones.

Then I see  
tufts of stuffing  
billowing from the hole in the seat

and something gray  
running in panic  
—a mouse.

No,  
not with that snakey naked tail.

I jump up,  
my books drop.

They're rats.



Rona and I push off from my locker and head to practice.

Struggling with the strap on my gym bag,  
I hear Rona say softly,

"Zat a bruise on Yaicha's chin today?"

My heart cramps up and can't do its job for  
one long beat.

"Yes" comes out in a hoarse whisper.  
I give up on the strap,  
letting it dig into my shoulder.

"Your dad?"

"Yes." How does she know that?

Rona starts swinging her duffel,  
looking around nonchalantly

as we enter the gym.

*"You never seem to have bruises."*

And Rona would know,

we see each other changing clothing every day.

"He likes my sister and brother

better than he likes me."

Did I just say that out loud?



Rona asks questions all the time.

Things I don't really want to answer,  
but I have to, somehow.

She's the only one I feel compelled to tell my  
reality to.

If I could just open my mouth wide enough  
to allow those gagging blobs of truth  
their slow, tar-seep passage  
up through my gullet,  
with barely enough oxygen to keep from  
passing out  
while they glorp over my tongue,  
those truths would reach my teeth,  
where if my jaw weren't unhinged,  
I might bite them off  
so I could  
breathe again.



Sprained my right thumb  
in last night's game

—we pounded the Red Hawks—  
so I proudly tape it up for school,  
until some guys  
jeer that I'm a pansy.

Which I'm not.

I mean, I can still play with a sprained thumb.

I rip off the tape  
before French.

As I slip into my seat  
Angeline points gently at  
the darkening thumb  
and whispers,  
“Ouch. I mean, *ouille!*”

I shrug like I'm fine,

grant her  
a quick grin

but at the boundary of  
her sympathy  
and  
my irritation,  
I take the grin  
back again.



Dreaming of  
rolling  
rolling  
rolling down  
a warm grassy slope  
laughing  
rolling faster  
rolling  
rolling  
into shadow  
rolling  
rolling  
fear  
rolling  
cold  
rolling  
*SMACK*  
into a tree.

I awake  
on the living room floor,  
moonless dark,

heart pounding,  
my head leaning  
against the leg of my father's chair.



Darren came into the kitchen  
this morning,  
black circles  
around wavering eyes,  
and he wouldn't look at any of us.

Mom said he was sick

but he's not sick.

I've seen this  
a few times before

always after he and my father fight

and then

my father "talks" to him  
in private

in his room  
for hours

but most of the time  
I don't hear their voices.



We are drinking Diet Coke  
on the couch after dinner,  
Mom and I.

She smoothes the black wool surface  
with her wedding hand,  
and says  
before they splurged and bought this  
furniture  
when they got married,  
my father  
had an enormous broken armchair  
they both squashed into,  
and someone else's television box for  
a side table.

She says  
they would read to each other  
from a book of Ogden Nash,  
my father stroking her hair.

I am floored.

Floored by her butter-soft eyes,

her caressing hand,  
her fondness for the furniture  
they bought together  
in a time  
of kindness.



I belong,  
sweating team effort,  
when the pass is right to Rona  
when I run to her and spring  
when my arm swing is on  
when our timing is perfection  
when I smack  
    that ol' white leather butt  
and the  
opposing team scrambles,  
stands erupt,  
high fives all around,  
singing together in the locker room.

I ran track last spring,  
nervous  
every meet  
    out there all alone  
    against seven other girls  
    on a narrow track.

The strength felt good

but nothing  
nothing  
like this.

Only working together.

Only these girls.

Only volleyball.



YES! What a hit!

Oh no,

Oh no,

Oh shit, she's down.

What a glorious hit

great form

great grunt

hand on

ball down

straight down

in her face,

six-packed,

floor-flat,

disoriented,

fighting tears,

bloody nose,

I'm rushing in

offering aid—

Can she feel it?

Elation running slicing through me

through my hand  
to her hand?

She only sits  
on her haunches,  
hand staunching  
the river red  
flowing south  
to her mouth.

I grimace guilty apologies.

But *YES!*  
A frickin' glorious hit!



After an hour of silence  
in the library  
studying  
fake oak grain on cubicle walls,

I love the way my voice sounds  
startling  
strong  
confident  
as I give a woman in teetering heels  
directions  
to the school office.



We just happen to be walking to  
the east wing  
at the same time.

Finally Angeline says,  
"You're tall, you've really gotten tall."

I hmpf.  
I mean, duh.

Now she's walking sideways to face me,  
earnestly explaining herself.

"No, really! You've grown so much lately!  
It's so incredible!"

I stop in the middle of the hall  
fist on my hip—

"Believe me, Ange,

I am aware that I have grown!"

I set my size-ten feet in motion as she reels in  
her shock  
and scampers after me.

"But, really, tall looks good on you.  
You're going to be beautiful!"

I peel off at psych class as she continues to  
world history.

Angie was digging a hole for herself,  
but I find myself  
wanting to  
believe  
the last thing she said.



I can see from my bedroom window  
that his Mustang is not parked under the  
oak tree.

Where is Jed?

We haven't had our nap in days.



Possessed for three seconds.

Some demon jumped  
into my mouth  
flapping my tongue with its claws  
to say  
words I'd never thought of—

“Yaicha, I was talking  
to *mom*.

You don't give a shit  
about my life, so  
why don't you just *shut up?*”

—and my jaw drops down  
and Yaicha's  
and Mom's.

And then the demon is gone,  
so I can mumble  
“sorry”

to my sister.

And I stand here  
in dumb  
confusion  
while they continue conversation.

Where the hell  
did that come from?



My father pokes me  
nastily  
in the side.

"You'll probably  
never  
get the nice rounded  
curves of  
a full woman.

You've always  
been skinny,  
always will."

I can feel  
each  
reclusive  
bone  
poke through,

the bones of  
Embarrassment,

Anger,

Relief.

I push some back in,

but leave

Anger

sticking out.



Walls are thin.

Doesn't matter  
what they are made of—  
wood and plaster  
wood and plaster and concrete block  
wood and plaster and concrete block and  
corky soundproof panels  
like in the music room at school.

Doesn't even matter  
which wall the bed is against,

I can hear  
everything.



I mean,  
*WHY* can't she just tell on him?  
It's just words.

Just  
open her mouth  
and out come those words.

And then he'd be stopped.

Right?



I stare hard at Yaicha  
during breakfast.

She's good with makeup  
really good  
from being in plays and musicals.

I stare at the smudge,  
purpling black  
on her jaw,  
barely buried under makeup.

Okay.  
She isn't  
good at it  
just because of plays.



It's cold enough this morning  
to want to stand  
in front of the woodstove  
after stoking it for the day.

"Hey, quit  
soaking up  
all the heat!"

Darren and I  
say that every time  
and shove each other  
in jest,  
and every time  
Mom says we deserve each other.

It's one of about  
only three  
things I know how  
to do  
with my  
brother.



Jed's peeling out  
in the school parking lot.  
Why doesn't it  
make me laugh,  
twirl,  
shout!  
like  
Ginger and Marci?

I stand alone  
crossing my arms  
eyes rolling  
making that  
"you are such an idiot"  
sound with my tongue.

When Jed has left just a cloud,  
Ginger and Marci  
glance at me,  
then pointedly roll eyes at each other.

Something as dumb as

burning rubber  
rattles  
my cardboard box of structure.

This is why  
I am not popular,  
I think.

Untwisting my bra strap  
in the middle of the hallway

and there is Jed coming out of room 32  
in serious discussion with another guy.

I blush his way,  
feel a little thrilled at showing off my bra strap  
in front of him

but his eyes glide over my head  
as he answers a question,  
missing me entirely.



I got an A on the third quiz in  
American history,  
an A,  
dammit.

Last time I got a B

up from a C

and my father said,

"If you can get a C  
you can get a B,

If you can get a B  
you can get an A."

So I got an A in American history,

which I only studied hard in  
because Mr. Parks is more like  
a friend to everyone

than a teacher  
and we got to interview this  
hundred-year-old man  
who's lived here  
forever  
and remembers when Cartwright Street  
was only a horse trail  
and the mill at Mill Pond  
actually worked.

I got an A  
and my father said,

"Grades don't mean anything."



He was reading in his chair  
I was reading on the couch  
both of us reading  
and drinking hot tea  
in the evening  
just like a peaceful father and daughter.

I bumped my cup  
and scalding tea sailed  
all into my jeans  
burning hot  
burning me  
and he slammed his book down  
yelling,

“You are so stupid!

What a stupid thing to do!”

Like I did it on purpose  
to spoil his night

Like I wasn't in enough pain

And I started to cry  
running away to rip off my jeans  
ice my leg  
ice it  
ice it.

When I washed my angry face  
and came back  
he was reading in his chair  
ignoring

the puddle of tea  
the fallen cup  
still wallowing on the couch.

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I am  
dumb  
as wood,  
old  
dry  
brown  
hardened  
splintering  
flammable  
unfeeling  
resistant  
jammed  
un  
speak  
ing

table  
bench  
chair

footstool.



Long ago  
we stood in the kitchen,  
my mother  
my father  
and I,  
hugging in a cluster  
when my father  
came home from work.

From their knees  
I leaned way back to see  
warm soft gazes for each other's faces,  
and the velvety kiss,  
until I pulled their attention  
to me  
down low.

They laughed,  
tousled my hair,  
and  
we all said  
I love you.



Knee pads at my ankles,  
covered in the brine of practice,  
I tromp into the kitchen  
and he's there.

Shit.

Why is he home so early?

My father downs what seems like an entire  
quart of water  
in one long swallow,  
staring around his tall glass at my damp  
person.

He carefully places the empty tumbler on the  
counter,  
turns precisely on one foot,  
leaves the kitchen

without a word.

So.

Before,  
he didn't want me to play  
and there was almost a conversation going.

Now he for sure knows I am still playing.

Why doesn't he say anything?



Yanking jeans over sweaty postpractice skin,  
knowing taking a shower would amplify  
where I've been.

I come out of my room,  
Darren comes up the stairs,  
and our father comes from the bathroom,  
    a damp bath towel dangling  
    from forefinger and thumb.

"Whose," he intones at me in the hallway,  
"is this?"

Darren holds out his hand.  
"Mine," he whispers.

Our father looks surprised.  
Did he think it was mine?

He breathes in,

launches the offensive at Darren.

"HOW MANY TIMES HAVE I TOLD YOU TO  
HANG THIS . . ."

louder and louder  
words crushing together  
in a piling roar  
except in excerpts

"YOU THINK YOU CAN JUST DO WHAT YOU  
WANT . . ."

"I AM THE ONE WHO KNOWS WHAT'S GOOD  
FOR YOU . . ."

and suddenly I realize  
he's actually yelling at me  
about volleyball.

I want to make him turn to me  
yell at *me*

I want to yell at *him*  
I am here  
right here

I am not furniture—

But when his hand  
smothers Darren's face with the wet towel,  
shoving him hard into the wall,

I am backing away.



Darren is tromping upstairs  
in work boots  
and a black scowl,

heading out back to split wood

and as he cuts through the living room  
swerves toward our father's chair

gives the leg a vicious kick  
so the chair rocks up on two legs  
and  
bangs down again,

Darren already jerking open the back door  
to a blast of fresher air.



Indian summer  
crowding  
at the farmer's market,  
Mom's requested squash in a string bag  
scraping the goosebumped skin  
below my shorts.

I crush  
lemongrass  
with my thumbnail,

breathing  
sharp cleansing.

Mr. Ogawa  
nods,  
gestures with a bok choy  
toward my calves.

"Leg like deer!"  
bobbing

grinning  
his compliment.

I flush pride at my volleyball strength,  
bob my head, too.  
What a sweet gentle man.



The best smell in the whole world  
is  
hot  
popcorn

slathered in decadent  
criminal amounts  
of butter  
cooked in the old copper-bottomed pot.

Lights off.

I bury my face in my bowl,  
the three of us kids  
watching  
*Some Like It Hot* with that  
hysterical Jack Lemmon,

munching together  
parallel gazes.



Man, I'm Starvin' Marvin  
running to meet Rona,  
there she is,  
close to the front near the salad bar  
but  
oh,  
Angeline just behind her.

I stop mid hurry  
a girl slams me from behind,  
we murmur sorry  
but all sound dims as I watch unnoticed,  
my best friend  
and  
my constant twitch

the daring  
and  
the whimpering

the architect  
and

the timber rot

the solid earth

and

the space walk, holding your breath  
because you forgot your helmet.

Maybe they said hello  
when they first got in line.

Now they simply ignore each other,  
inches apart with their trays.

We don't need to be a threesome.

I sidle into the ragged tail of the lunch line.



“So who the hell cares?”

Rona throws three carrots down with minimal  
crunching.

“Not like she’s a friend  
or an enemy, right?

She’s nobody.

So why does Angeline bug you?”

She whips those blue eyes my way,  
and all I can do  
is swallow my hummus  
and shrug.

A thought forms—

I shove it down.

Something about  
my father.



Errands on the way home.

My father jogs across pavement to his office,  
I stay in the parking lot  
watching sparrows' rusty  
heads  
pop-in-pop-out  
of car grills

nibbling bugs  
spitting out papery wings  
wiping grubby beaks.

On each car  
a tiny  
bird-sized neon sign:  
DINNER BUFFET!  
SMORGASBORD!  
EAT AT JOE'S GRILL!

My father reappears,  
hugging some blonde  
half his age good-bye

kissing her fully longer,  
sexier  
than a married man  
should even imagine.

He walks to our car,  
smug.  
I turn back to the birds,  
glance at their  
happy meal  
and feel  
a familiar familial nausea.



## Homework.

Efficiency models  
for the environmental psych unit.

### What I Can Live Without

cars  
cell phones  
wall-to-wall carpet  
furniture  
whitening toothpaste  
grape soda  
Polo cologne  
growing at the speed of giant kelp  
that glue smell from the woodworking shop  
Ginger's snarky giggling  
Madame DuPont's fish-pale eyes  
Angeline's whiny voice  
choosing sides  
a father



There's Jed  
strolling up his driveway  
with a senior buddy  
in the indigo evening.

He wasn't home  
all afternoon  
and I am  
suddenly  
furious and garter-snake-striped with jealousy.

I want to run out there,  
plant a real estate  
SOLD  
sign  
between this guy  
and Jed.

That's it.  
I'm officially nuts.



Both hands in  
Yaicha's wastebasket,  
digging  
while she's down  
in the laundry room.

Crinkly Snickers wrapper  
plastic promo case  
sleek Clinique compact  
                  corners still packed with Sugar Toast  
stained satin ribbon  
Fashionista receipt  
fermenting apple core

I stop at the racy lacy bra  
—no way did mom buy that—  
worn to weariness,  
elasticless.

I usually don't find much  
but

search under pressure,  
my heart-pounding glimpse  
of  
Yaicha's world.



"Let's go camping tonight,"  
I say softly  
to Yaicha,  
starting the game  
    where I reach out  
    and she does what she wants  
    with it.

Her eyes pointy and dark  
she throws words out of her mouth.  
"I hate camping."

Staring back  
I whisper  
"I hate this *house*."

"You don't know anything.  
He'll never let us go."  
She thunks the back of her head

against the kitchen wall.

“He’d never let *you* go.

He’d never notice  
if I was gone.”

I try a small smile,  
nudge her,

“He’s got a meeting.  
Mom’ll let us go.  
I’ll get the tent.”  
I hold my breath.

Thunk  
with her head,  
she turns away.  
“I hate camping.”

Game over.



In the attic  
watching my exhales fog and dissipate  
over a stage of life,  
a cast of  
cast-off  
furniture and relics,  
a dull palette of gray  
in the worn-out gloom.

The ancient pine banana box  
filled with Grandma's tea pieces,

the huge empty rococo frame  
garish even in dust,

the oak stool, folding table, sagging armchair  
from Aunt Sepha's house,

all unnecessary,  
superfluous,  
not worthy of life downstairs,

hidden away  
like unused emotions

chilled to a crisp.

Unhappily comfortable here,  
cold tears course  
trails over my cheeks  
like Olympic skiers,  
crashing over the precipice of my jaw  
in a spectacular  
agony of defeat.



Yesterday afternoon  
my father and I  
tiled the bathroom floor  
while everyone was out.

No praise.  
No critique.  
No words.  
No one there worth talking to.

His section of tile was perfect.  
My section of tile was perfect.

He didn't show off our work  
when everyone got home.

I showed mom which section  
was mine,  
but I don't think she believed me.

After dinner  
I chiseled a chip

out of one of his tiles  
next to  
the toilet.



Transparency girl.

Darren even sat in my chair for his breakfast,  
my glass of OJ right there in front of him  
waiting for me.

Walking to school  
instead of waiting for the bus  
because I am  
so  
damn  
grumpy  
this morning,

hoping  
the smell of autumn  
will revive me.

“Red-and-yellow,  
gold-and-brown,  
autumn-leaves-are-falling-down,”  
in time with my feet,

knowing it sounds juvenile,  
even saying it  
out loud  
convincing, convincing,

but pretty soon  
it's just a jumble of  
consonants,

a rhythm  
for my  
brain to pound by.



I have stopped for a mocha at Johansen Java,  
lower lip on smooth plastic lid,  
listening to Tight Yoga Suit explain to  
Over-Dyed Poodle Perm how starting up  
a gallery for her son's artwork is not a  
selfish act,  
smelling warm raisins as the elderly man next  
to me breaks open a steaming scone,  
mumbling that he's fine, he's fine,  
he'll stay in his house no matter what  
that goodfernnothin' son says,  
patting some little boy with bedhead as he  
chokes on crumbs,  
his tattooed mother yapping into her  
phone about the water bill,

and I feel a fuzzy warmth toward humans.

Disparate,  
fascinating,

bonding with a cup of joe in the same place.

Eavesdropping on strangers  
gives more insight into a life  
than having a conversation with someone you  
know.

People are more honest  
when they don't know you are listening.



"I don't know, she just—  
she just doesn't interest me."

Kyler is sitting behind me in algebra,  
answering a grilling by his friend.

"Fake nails,  
all that white skin,  
doesn't she go outside?  
A person should go outside sometimes,  
feel the weather."

His pencil eraser is bouncing  
*tok*  
*tok*  
*tok*  
on the desktop.

"I mean, yeah, she's hot,  
but . . ."

The teacher clears her throat and Kyler goes quiet.

I like the "but."



Rona and I  
each in our own bus seat  
lie on our backs  
feet out the open windows  
as we head back home.

We just barely won  
against Raeburn  
and we didn't "play up to our potential"  
but hey  
another win.

Our 8-2 record has us heading for the state  
tournament.

Rona and I  
hang our heads off our seats  
into the aisle,  
watching a Barbie player  
put makeup on her sweaty face,  
and roll our eyes at each other.

Probably forgot to bring deodorant

but her face  
will be all dolled up.

Smoothing on lipstick,  
Barbie catches my eye and shrugs,  
and we grin at each other.

To see her primp  
you'd never know how tough she is on the  
court.

One of the toughest.



Sweaty in my sweats,  
I step into the kitchen.

“Where’d you come from?”  
Darren asks,  
dish towel dangling.

Yaicha butts in,  
all business at the sink,  
“She’s playing volleyball.”

Darren’s eyebrows fly up.

“Yeah? Cool,”  
and  
with a fierce scowl  
he snaps the towel  
at me.

I dance away  
suddenly agile  
and he flicks the table leg  
instead of mine.



Snuck out to a party  
at the Forsters' half-framed house—  
snuck,  
    yeah,  
        like anyone at home noticed I left.

Tired of meandering  
between  
knots of dull conversation,  
I hunker down onto the unfinished porch steps  
mittens around my two-hour beer,  
listening to Kyler explain to someone  
where the back trailhead is for Mount Logan.

“No, that’s the main trailhead you’re  
    thinking of.”  
Kyler is itching his head  
        through his hand-knit hat.

Before I can think, I say,  
“The back trailhead starts off the highway,

near the twelve-mile marker."

Kyler turns,  
earflaps swinging.  
"You've done that hike?"  
He lets out a whistle,  
reaches over to push my thigh with a gloved  
hand.  
"All the way to the top?  
You're strong, volleyball girl!"

"Good oxygen up there in July," I say,  
grinning madly at his compliment.  
"And we had a black-mama-bear encounter  
halfway up."  
  
The other guy snorts,  
"Bet you ran with your tail between your legs."

Kyler's warm brown eyes examine mine.  
"No, she didn't," he says.

"You don't run from black bears,"  
I say to the guy,  
but I'm gazing at Kyler,  
heart thumping.



No one is home.

I stand poised  
midroom,  
woofers buzzing the windows.

And when  
shrieking guitar strings  
rip me free  
I begin with the desk chair,  
throw it to the side,  
spin the desk  
    to the center  
        of the room,  
shove the bed  
    momentarily in front of the bedroom  
        door  
    then against the far wall,  
plow the desk smack against baseboards,  
ram the chair home,  
crash the dresser in the corner,  
flop the carpet open to the left,

whirl  
with fingers wide,  
the beat fades,

and  
I stand poised,  
arm hair on end,  
in a new country.



Startled out of a light nap,  
my face against the couch back.

Jed wraps an arm around my shoulders  
to roll both of us  
so he can reach the ringing phone.

I consider grumbling.

"Yuh. Yuh. No, nothing important,  
just napping."

He yawns.

"Sure, let's go now. Yuh. See ya."

He tosses the phone to the other end  
of the couch,  
tapping my back three times,  
Jed language for "I need you to move."

I shift,

squinch my eyes like I had been sleeping.

He eases out from under me and stands,  
"I gotta go,"  
stretching long arms,  
another long yawn with canines showing,  
and he tosses his coat over his shoulder.

"See you tomorrow, I guess," and he's loping  
out the door,  
leaving me sprawled,  
unnapping,  
alone in his basement.

I glare at the texture of the ceiling,  
trying not to cry.



Last night

a group of us from volleyball and some guys  
saw that movie  
about all the world's nuclear power plants  
gone wacko

and the guy next to me  
actually took my hand  
early on  
and didn't give it back.

We held hands through most of the movie  
for some reason.

When the reactors melted down in  
enormous explosions

he gripped my fingers so hard  
my rings bit me  
and I pulled back.

He let go and kind of stretched.

I was able to enjoy  
the rest of the nuclear meltdown with  
feeling in my fingers,  
but I felt

like I was the only one in the theater.

And at the end of the movie  
the boy-romantic-interest lived,  
of course.

The girl-romantic-interest passed out from  
radiation exposure  
and it was clear  
she'd never make it.



Lying on my side  
in my old running tights  
on the black couch,

    elbow cocked  
    head propped  
reading, my usual  
escape.

My father walks in,  
stops in the middle  
of the carpet,  
contemplating me.

"You are getting to be  
very sexy," he says  
quietly  
in a reverent tone  
I don't like at all.

I sit up fast  
snap shut my book  
fist clenched

mouth dry  
controlled walk past him  
down the hall  
to my room  
close the door  
back away  
back away  
breathe.

Don't look at me.

Don't look at me

ever

again.



The boys' soccer team swaggers by our  
pregame warm-up.

"Whoa!  
Did you see—  
that girl can *hit!*"

The team clown is performing loudly for us.

"What's her name?  
What?  
Anke?"

Kyler jostles him  
to keep him moving,  
and throws a wave and a smile to me.

The guy is still at it as they amble out  
to the fields,  
"I want her on my team!  
Hey, Anke!  
Wanna be on my team?"

I am blushing  
as I run back to the end of the hitting line,  
blushing  
but grinning.

Guys sure are obnoxious.



Swapping  
ProBars after our big win,  
half my peanut butter  
for  
half Rona's chocolate malt.

We chuck the crumpled wrappers to each other  
grunting,  
super slo-mo,  
grunting  
like we're hitting the volleyball.

I holler  
“*MINE!*”  
as her wrapper flies to me,  
and toss it back  
over her head  
“*Go, Rona, GO!*”  
screaming at her  
as she  
dives to the grass

and rolls to a stop at the foot of the tree.

*"YEAH, RONA!"*

Her on the ground holding up the wrapper,  
me with my hands up in victory,

*"The CROWD GOES WIIILLLD!"*

Two senior guys stroll by,

eyebrows raised.

We grin.

Volleyball has taught me to yell.



Yawning at my locker,  
gathering English books,  
when a long body grazes my back and  
there is Kyler,  
looking a little breathless.

"Hey, caught you," he says, flashing a grin.

"Hey, Kyler!"  
Was that too enthusiastic?  
*And I love that green shirt on you.*

He rubs a hand down his sleeve.  
"I was wondering if you were going to the  
Harvest Dance."

Okay, panic.

"I, um, yeah, I'm going.  
Probably with Rona, you know,  
not as a date, ha! but, well,

I don't think I should go and just dance with  
one person all night,  
you know?

So I was going to go with friends  
and just dance with whoever I want."

Way too much talking.

But Kyler is nodding,  
"Yeah, that's what a bunch of us are doing,  
as well.

But I was hoping you'd save me a dance?  
Or two."

Squeezes my forearm and laughs a little.

"Sure! Thanks!" I squeak.  
Dammit—I hate squeaking.

"Great!" he says,  
sliding his hand off my arm  
in a trail of warmth,

“Gotta get to chemistry.”

He walks down the hall backward  
hands gesturing rising bubbles  
with a pop-pop-pop of his lips,  
then he waves  
and turns the corner.



Changing into  
my uniform,  
ignoring all the locker-room babble,  
thinking of Kyler,  
wondering  
why he seems to like me.

Thrilled he might like me!

But I don't get it  
and  
I don't really believe it  
because  
there are so many cute girls  
and I am basically  
a nothing freshman with big feet and a newly  
discovered pimple on the side of her nose.



On the bus  
to an away game with Robins-Hancock,  
zoning to tunes,  
teammates around me  
bouncing in their seats.

My mind travels to  
this family of crows  
in the woods next door,  
cackling, chuckling, creating ruckuses and  
general wild rumpuses,  
each one  
involved with the next one,  
knowing who likes to sit next to who among  
the pine needles,  
shuffling in a file on the limb  
so everyone is finally comfy.

I smile, watching,  
as they ruffle and rattle their feathers,

all their emotions  
laid out on the branch,  
so to speak,  
no secrets,  
no wondering what the crow beside you  
is feeling.

Kind of like my volleyball family.  
Just as noisy.  
Fewer feathers.



Rona drops me off  
into windy darkness at the bottom  
of the driveway,  
a shuffle of leaves  
blown against my feet,  
and I stand still,  
listening.

Acorns plopping onto damp asphalt,  
moaning of hemlocks,  
a high whine of air  
whisking around the corner  
of the house.

It's stirring energy out here.

A yellow angle of light from the kitchen  
scrapes the back lawn.

My ponytail whips my face  
with the first smattering of drops,

so I head in  
before the deluge,

though I'd rather stand out here  
to hear rain pelting the oak trees,  
than go inside  
and hear what's there.



Yaicha is crying gently  
in the bathroom.

Darren,  
hesitant,  
goes in.

What I hear,  
flat against the hall wallpaper,  
is the lift at the end  
of Darren's soft sentence,  
a question.

And Yaicha's voice  
flat as mud at low tide,

"I'll live for now.

You know  
he said he'd kill me  
if I told.

He'd kill me."

And I hear it,

a wooden mast snapping  
from years of termites below—

I hear it  
and know

it is true.

He would kill her.



Can't sleep through it  
so I pad to the kitchen.

Earphones on  
huddling on the stool  
cuddling hot chocolate.

In she comes,  
glazed  
and frayed,

leans on the  
butcher block  
then lays her cheek  
on the smooth  
scored  
wood.

I am still  
as brick  
and then crack,

click off my music,

push my steaming cocoa  
across the maple  
to Yaicha.

Her fingers wrap  
the scalding mug,

eyes closed.



... and i'm jealous!  
with a sick  
acidic  
burbling  
bile  
i want what they have

as horrible  
curdling  
vile  
as it is  
darren and yaicha  
get more  
than  
me.



Sometimes

first thing in the morning

when I walk down the hallway before class

shouts and hurrying footsteps and laughter

spin off,

sucked away by a whirlpool,

and I could be alone,

deaf,

a different sort of fish

in this vast school of shining matching silver.

And it takes something physical—

the vice principal's hand on my arm,

"You all right, Anke?"

to bring me back.



Walking home alone,  
cooling sweat.  
An odd afternoon of fog  
slaps softly like a damp paper towel.

My breath feels thick,  
striding past the soggy soccer field,  
around the goal post  
off the edge of the grass.

Entering birch trees,  
a dove careens by,  
mockingbirds holler,  
wind washes the carpet of yellow leaves.  
Rounding the path's curve  
a slice of fall glances my jaw  
and my nose opens  
to take in something sharp,  
something easier to breathe,  
an acrid, lively, nervous smell  
that says something cutting and different  
is on its way.



He went into Yaicha's room  
last night  
after he hit her  
across the mouth  
for reading  
*Cosmo* magazine.

I burned in my blood,  
I turned to Mom  
as we stood in the hall  
and inside my head screamed,  
*DO something!*

Her eyes glazed and wide  
like an injured cat,  
her mouth pulled tight,  
Mom sighed in a voice that didn't match,

"It'll be okay.  
He's just making peace with her."

And she walked away.



It just occurred to me.

It's her choice.

Yaicha chooses not to tell anyone  
and Darren does too

and Mom.

Am I the only one bothered by this?  
I mean  
bothered enough to think about it?

So all the pressure is on me,  
the Youngest and Most Bothered.  
Or maybe I am just  
outside enough,  
being the footstool observing from the corner,  
that I have a view of reality.

And I can't stand it anymore.

Why me?  
I don't need this crap.



Then  
why don't I tell on him?

If they don't,  
why don't I?

Because.

Because I am safe this way,  
silent  
unnoticed.

Because my family would crack  
snap  
shatter

    like pine boughs in an ice storm  
jagged pieces scattered,  
irreparable,

and there would be no family

and I don't want that on my head.

What we have is better than that.

Right?



Squid ink black dreaming,  
Running hard,  
running from,  
from my father  
in that mask,  
running to,  
to the school  
bell's ringing  
incessant ringing,  
late late late,  
volleyballs  
rolling in the hall,  
Angeline  
Angeline  
pestering  
pestering,  
pushing by people  
to get to me,  
I am panting  
with exertion  
backed up against it,  
Jed slouching

against my locker,  
pointing at me,  
no expression,  
pointing,  
I wear no clothes,  
the entire  
student  
body  
halts  
to stare in silence—

bursting to breathe,  
I look down to find  
I have  
a penis.





PART  
THREE





I should have worn polypro liners  
inside my work gloves this morning.

Brittle frost,  
and I am lugging dead branches from  
the front yard  
into the side woods.

Usually I just haul ass and get it done,  
keeps me warm.

Today I am shivering in my plaid flannel shirt,  
staring into the windows of our house,  
my perspective skewed  
to an outsider's.

Why am I suddenly uncomfortable?

Up till now  
life was just normal.  
Maybe not normal for everyone,

but *my* normal.

I used to feel solid,  
knowing my job in this house—  
silence, blinders, stillness.

Now

I feel like a lumberjack  
with a nail file instead of an ax,  
out of context,  
frustrated,  
looking around me to kill time.  
Except that I am noticing things.  
And being bothered by them.

I don't like it.

I don't want to think about it.



"Hey," I say, shifting my backpack,  
standing in his basement doorway.  
"No practice today, lighting repairs."

Jed pats the couch,  
eyes on the television.  
"Have a seat," he says absently.

Wow.

What an invitation.

"Um, no thanks.  
I have algebra problems to finish."

I have never made an excuse before.

"Oh. 'Kay, do a good job."  
He smiles,  
but his eyes swing back to the TV,  
and I am so out of here.



I've been telling Rona all about Kyler,  
having talked to him, like, what, twice?

Peeling a pale slice of tomato off her sandwich,  
she slaps it onto her tray.

"So why is he in chem class as a freshman?"

Trust Rona to point out I don't know him at all.  
"Must've tested out of bio?"

Rona whacks her sandwich back together,  
chomping through the middle with gusto.  
"Musht be shmart," she mumbles.

I nod,  
blowing steam off my chili.  
"He was nervous, even asking me for a dance."  
I dump the spoonful back in,  
feeling disappointed.  
Aren't guys superhuman about their feelings?

"Well, no shit, Anke,

you're this tall, gorgeous, amazing  
volleyball player,  
even if you are a freshman."

I roll my eyes.

She waves her milk,  
spraying liquid from the straw.  
"You are, even if you're too blind to see it.  
And he's smart, not asking you for a

big commitment,  
just a dance or two.

But if you'd said no, how devastating would  
that be to a good-looking guy?

I mean, not that he's really popular or  
anything,  
and neither are you—"

"Gee, thanks for reminding me."

—but he's supposed to be a great  
soccer player,

and his buddies would sure give him shit if you refused to dance with him."

Like I *would* refuse to dance with him.

Flexing the styro bowl,  
it finally cracks.

"Wanna go to this Thursday's soccer game  
with me, Rona?"



Under lights on Thursday night,  
end of the second half,  
tied with Westland 3 to 3,  
shouts of fans crystallizing midair  
at the coldest soccer game on record.

Rona shrieks through her scarf,  
razzing the ref.  
I am hopping for circulation,  
clapping mittens,  
thinking how smart I am,  
wearing tights under my jeans.

Kyler is back in the game with less than a  
minute to go,  
right wing,  
he has the ball,  
a fluid body speeding downfield.  
Westland is on us,  
but Kyler does this special spin,  
taking control again,

his defender lurching—  
without thinking I belt out,  
“GO, KYLER, GO!”  
up on my toes—  
and suddenly he feints left,  
passes to our center,  
who passes back,  
Kyler taps it once,  
then kicks the ball past the goalie’s glove into  
the high left corner of the net in the last five  
seconds and we’ve won the game!

“Yaaaaah!”  
I grab Rona’s shoulders,  
bouncing together  
in a screaming mass of elated faces.

As players flow to the side  
Kyler catches sight of me,  
his eyes light up in recognition,  
the widest smile ever.  
Pulling off a mitten to give a thumbs-up

I grin back  
and he's carried on with the  
crowd's enthusiasm,

but he smiled right at me,  
me,  
personally.



Oh my god  
that's Darren  
leaning against the stage  
at the far end of the court.

I've never seen him in the gym.  
Ever.

His arms are folded over a textbook,  
and he's doing his  
breathing through his nose thing  
like he's checking the atmosphere for foreign  
substances in parts per million,  
no expression I can see from here.

We finish our drill  
and I manage not to shank the ball  
into the bleachers  
in front of my brother.

Now we go over hitting coverage  
and I feel a bubble of elation

for some reason  
as Darren watches us.

He stands there the whole drill.

I pretend to suddenly see him,  
raise a casual from-the-hip wave.  
His small smile flashes  
and he pushes off the stage  
to head to debate club.

I lean to the girl next to me.

"That's my brother, Darren."



After volleyball practice  
I spot Jed walking parallel to me across the lot,  
and he angles over.

"Want to walk home today? It's pretty warm,"  
he says,  
throwing an arm over my shoulders.

It's been days since he's even said hello.  
"Careful," I say, grimacing,  
"you're touching a freshman in public."

That crooked lip sets my heart dancing,  
dammit.

"So? Senior guys can get away with it.  
It's the young girls who get the reputation."

I pull out from under,  
pissed.  
"That's exactly it,"

and I walk three steps out to the side of him,  
arms folded.

Jed pulls at my arm,  
laughing,  
trying to uncross me.

"C'mon, Ank, you of all people don't have a rep."

Wondering  
if that's good or bad,  
I let him release one tucked arm.

"Aaaah, I need a nap," he says in a yawn,  
squeezing my forearm and letting it go.

Does he ever do anything else?  
"Hey," I say, bopping his bicep,  
"let's walk home through College Woods!

Take off our sneaks, put our toes in the  
icy brook."

His right eyebrow goes up.

"In October?"

Not his thing.

But napping is.



I wish I'd taken the late bus home.  
Jed can't possibly be this worn-out after  
two or three of my kisses,  
I'm not that good.

But he's snoring.

Do I need a nap?

No.

Do I need kissing?

Definitely.

There has been an imbalance  
between the two lately.

And maybe there's another guy out there  
who might enjoy  
kissing me more.



When I come into the dining room,  
French book in hand,  
Yaicha doesn't even register me.

All these cool charcoal rubbings  
cover the table  
and she hovers on tiptoe  
darting in  
moving one pattern close to another  
tipping back for a different perspective  
moving a piece minutely  
knocking her rings on the table  
as she contemplates.

I glide into view.  
She shuffles through wall textures  
heating grates  
fig leaf veins  
sneaker soles

and shifts focus toward my face.  
I gape when I see the bright bruise

under her left eye.

Un-make-upped.

She glares defiance,  
says nothing.



It's not really that Yaicha sat before everyone  
else at the table.

This time it made him angry.  
Next time it might not.

I know it's not Yaicha.  
Or Darren.  
Or me.  
Or mom.

It's him.

Inflict.  
Dominate.  
Impair.

It's all him.

Psycho-man.

And live-in victims

assuage him,  
keep him hidden  
from  
the rest of the world.

I suppose in that way we are useful.



"Your father must have  
info like that."

Angeline is at me  
again.

Mom is making me work with her  
on topics for government  
and Angie is  
forever formulating festering questions  
to present  
to Authorities,  
Officials,  
and suspicious  
Politicals.

"He must have  
books and books,"  
Angie is pleading.  
"He's a professor."

I'm not asking  
him

for anything.

I want to say,

*Get over your goddamn crush,  
Angie,  
you have no idea  
who he is.*

But my jaws  
clamp.

"You're grumpy.  
I'll call him,"  
she offers  
and digs out  
a sparkly blue cell phone.

Well why not?  
She's already more a part of my family  
than I am.

She gets his answering service.



"No, no, his mom invested in that waterfront  
thing and now it's belly-up.

They already took out, like, a second mortgage  
on the house.

My mom knows the real estate broker.

I mean it.

Jed's family is flat broke."

Cherry-blossom lip gloss glues Marci's mouth  
into a smirk.

I am at the next table  
shielded by a forkful of spaghetti special  
and an escaped swath of hair.

Jed is broke?

He's always buying one of the guys a Coke,  
gas for someone's car,  
the latest music.

I glance around  
and there's Jed at the back

listening to a buddy tell a story.  
A slight smile on his lips  
but a faraway look.

I'm staring.

Because isn't it incredible,  
how you don't know much  
about the people you spend every day with.



Watching mom's hair curl  
in the steam from the broth,  
biting my upper lip.

I offer my pyramid of meatballs  
and finally stutter,  
"Would you,  
maybe,  
come to  
my game  
Friday?"

Distracted in her timing  
she sighs,  
"Oh, I don't know.  
Fridays are so busy."

I back away,  
sandpaper mouth,  
stumbling in my newly enlarged feet,  
grasping the table

smeared with raw meat.

Right.

Mom is usually  
home alone  
on Friday nights.



I think  
of mom as an oasis,  
center of calm  
in raging rapids.

But what a deception

because if I tread water in that spot  
with her too long  
I am lulled in froth,  
mesmerized,  
brain waves whirlpooled  
to stay there  
too,

watching petals  
feathers  
branches  
whirl by.

Why does she stay there?



Saturday night,  
dejected in the dark,  
dancing halfheartedly with an embarrassingly  
eager guy

    a full head shorter than me,  
    his body gyrating with abandon,  
when I finally catch sight of Kyler  
leaning on the wall near the front speakers.

This is terrible.

How do I nonchalantly happen to go by him  
    when he's standing so far from any  
    path of travel?

Has he been there all night?

Harvest Dance is already more than half over.  
Maybe he changed his mind,  
he's staying out of the way.

    Maybe I should just slink out the back at  
    the end of this stupid, endless song,  
    right about now.

Maybe—

Wait.

He's pushing off the wall,  
heading right for me!

The heavy beat of the song fades,  
my own internal beat heating up.

Eager Short Kid slugs me in the arm,  
"Hey, how 'bout another one?"  
I think I murmur no thanks,  
pushing through people toward the smile on  
Kyler's lips.

Taking both my arms in his hands,  
he laughs,  
"An opening at last!  
You are a popular girl!"

I open my mouth to protest  
that I was just biding time waiting for him,

but in my wisest decision to date,  
I close my mouth again  
as he pulls me in for what happens to be a  
slow  
song.



Swaying,  
turning in that  
slow  
dance  
circle.

My heart thumping,  
or his?

It seems the same rhythm,  
chest to chest,  
my cheek at the bottom of his jaw.

If it's my heartbeat  
I need to slow it down,  
seem relaxed.

If it's his heartbeat,  
he's as excited as I am to be dancing together,  
and I am thrilled by this,  
and nervous

that he's nervous.

He smoothes his hands over my lower back.

And then I feel it.

Our legs are the same length  
so our hips are the same height.

I feel it,  
panic,  
try to pull away just enough so I'm not  
pressed up against it  
without being too obvious.

Kyler pulls back a little too—  
now we're both  
embarrassed.

At the end of the song I chirp "Thanks!"  
running for the safety of the girls' room.



What did that mean?

Doesn't an erection  
mean  
he wants to have sex?

I don't know him enough for that.

Dammit.

I liked him so much before this happened.  
He's warm,  
    like buttered pancakes and bacon  
        snuggled on the plate,  
    like a Synchilla jacket in the frost of  
        morning,  
    like the scent of cedar smoke from a  
        chimney.

But this other thing.

I don't know how to put them together in the  
same person  
and still like him.



Last to shower  
Sunday morning,  
who knows where my family disappeared to.

There's a note for me to do laundry.

Yay.

It's going to take more than stinky clothes  
to wipe my mind of Ky—  
don't even think his name.

Banging around the kitchen,  
I finally throw down a handful  
of Oat Crunchers,  
wonder what he eats for breakfast—  
don't—  
and munching loudly,  
pound downstairs to start the  
washing machine.

My knee pads are still wet

on top of the dryer  
so I toss them in even though heat'll  
kill elastic—

Kyler elastic—

DON'T—

and I press the button,  
lean against the rumbling metal,  
listening to the *kathunka-thunka* of two knee  
pads making the rounds.

Going to be a long day

and I'm already sick of myself.



Amazing

how you can spend so much of the school day  
hoping  
to see someone,

and when things go wrong

how you can spend so much of the school day  
desperate  
to avoid them.



Kyler is watching me  
as I am trapped in the lunch line—  
    please don't talk to me  
    please don't talk to me  
—his eyes full of hurt,  
and I feel bad,  
but it's so much easier  
when Rona arrives and cuts in front of me  
so I have someone to yell at,  
joke too loudly with,  
shove around,  
and I don't have to look at his eyes.



He actually comes to my locker.

“Can I please talk to you for a minute?”

Kyler’s face is squinched up.

I feel my face go white and paper thin  
as I nod,

and he takes my elbow

in a gentle, nice way,

moving us around a corner to the back  
stairwell.

All I can think of is  
this is where couples kiss,  
but that is so obviously not  
what he wants right now.

He lets go of my elbow,  
grasps my hand just for a second and  
releases it,  
a trace of a grimace.

He leans against the wall

with a whoosh of breath,  
rubbing the sleek part of his neck with a  
long hand,  
and looks up at me from a ducked head—  
“I’m sorry.”

I feel my jaw drop.  
“I’m the one who ran,” I retort.

He smirks a little.  
“I don’t blame you.  
I just like you so much and—and—and—  
I don’t seem to have a lot of control over what  
that, um, does to me.”

His widened pupils flicker from the floor to me  
and back again.

I blush.

“I just like you, Anke.  
I just want to do stuff together sometimes,

maybe.

We like the same things, like hiking."

"So we could be . . . good friends, then."

I manage to say.

"Yeah!" he says with a relieved grin,  
and I am angry at myself for saying it,  
and disappointed in him for agreeing.



At the beginning of the night  
my father put on his horrible mask  
and made me hide behind him in the doorway  
so I could see  
their little terrified faces  
and trembling bags of goodies.  
"Trick or treat?"

He was unrelenting,  
not saying a word,  
just breathing,  
a beast smelling carrion.

Several ran away without candy  
causing him  
great glee.

Then he got bored  
closed the door,  
one naked outside bulb on,

and played the recording  
of wolves howling

and no one came  
after that.



"What if he died?"

Words bounce off the wall, the dryer,  
the concrete floor,  
land with a *poof* in the pile of laundry  
we're folding.

Yaicha swings to stare at me in shock.

"I can't believe you'd even say  
that  
out loud."

She whispers like he's in the next room.

I shrug,  
for once looking her in the eye.  
"So. What if he did?"

Her lashes sweep down.

"It's not going to happen."

I'm feeling ruthless.  
"Just go with it."

I blow my hair forcefully out of my vision.  
"What if he died?"

The whites of her eyes show  
so that her irises seem very small,  
like a cartoon character who realizes  
they've just stepped off the cliff of the  
Grand Canyon.

"Tell me you aren't going to try and—  
and—  
kill him," she hisses.

She is so out there.  
"I said 'died,' Yaicha, not 'I'm going to kill him.'  
Think about it. What would we do?"

She breathes hard through her nose,  
then turns away,  
picks up her stack of laundry  
in a sweep of sudden washerwoman authority.  
"Only the good die young.  
He'll live to be a hundred and twenty."



Stretching on the living room floor  
contorting myself  
to relax my left gluteus minimus.

Switching legs,  
my head is almost under  
his chair.

I start to scootch away,  
then stop,  
noticing upholstery staples in a line  
under the seat.

One is loose.

Reaching under,  
I pick at it.

It's out.

Look, that one's loose, too.

It's out.

And another  
and another  
and one more

and the under-fabric is sagging.

Think I'm finished stretching.

Burst of energy—  
scramble full tilt downstairs to the garage  
to sprinkle  
staples  
over cold fish bones  
at the bottom of the trash can.



State Quarter Finals!

A home game!

Rona is always in uniform first,  
running in and out  
to warm up  
and report who's arrived in the stands.

She trots in  
with the update  
of our fans.

"Jackie's mom,  
Ellen's mom,  
Irene's two hot brothers!"  
and her eyes slide  
over me.

"No one yet."

They won't come.

They never do.



My father  
says  
competition is bad

but in biology class  
we talked about  
how  
without competition  
there is no  
natural selection  
and  
we all could have  
died  
out  
because we didn't fight back  
when some angry ape  
slapped us around  
or  
pillaged our bananas.

Survival  
depends on

contesting the despot,  
competing for the best bananas,  
fitness in the fight.

Works for me.  
I am ready for the opposition.



We won the match in two games,  
and I soared,  
I soared!

I jumped so high,  
tendons of steel,  
I pounded that Molten right  
into the floorboards,

our home crowd was enormous,  
stamping, yelling,

I was fierce,  
a warrior,  
dominant!  
Dominant!

On to the semi-finals!

Afterward,  
Coach raised an eyebrow.

"What got into you today?  
Quite the performance."

Weird—  
I am not sure,  
but he seemed  
a little  
concerned.



Feeling out of sorts,  
uneasy,  
Sunday bluesy,  
low-down,

and I shouldn't be, right?

Great volleyball on Friday night,  
moving on to the semis—

but I am in a funk,  
raking the last of the rain-mashed leaves,  
watery snot dripping off my nose.

The bubble of game greatness has popped  
  
and I am back to plain old me,  
alone and soggy on the lawn,

a drizzle beginning to fall.

Thanksgiving is coming this month  
and in some doomy-gloomy premonition  
I feel like  
I have nothing to be thankful for.



I am annoyed  
in my underwear  
when Angeline comes into the locker room  
before Monday's practice,  
clutching her pale pink sweater,  
breathlessly spilling  
that we could pick up government law info  
at my father's office.

"He said 'Sure!'" she squeals.

His specialty,  
and grudgingly I am thinking it *would* help us  
on Thursday, Government Day.  
I grunt on my knee pads.

He'll leave a folder on his desk because,  
sigh,  
"he might have a meeting."  
She is briefly bereft.

I say I'll meet her in the lobby after practice.

"Oh, I told him I'd go, I don't mind."

Grrrr.

He *is* my father.

"No, I'll meet you," I throw at her  
retreating back  
but she's gone.

Cock my foot to lace my left sneaker.

"Why don't you just frickin' move in with us,"  
I say out loud.

I'll be glad when this government thing is over,  
this annoying extracurricular supposed honor  
that forces me to spend  
even more time  
with Angeline.



I'm a little late  
getting to my father's building  
after hanging out in the locker room  
    with Rona, reliving every play  
    from the Quarters  
        and making up a few.  
I scan for Angeline in the lobby  
then sprint up the three flights  
    on postpractice elation's momentum.  
Coming to the DR. LARUS FELD etched on his  
    frosted door,  
I hitch up my sweatpants,  
hoping he's not in.

Tapping lightly,  
turning the knob,  
the door swings in silence, fangs of light  
    glinting in the glass.

Then I hear—

I hear—something—soft crying somewhere.

Angeline?

Clamping gym bag to my body,  
sneakers on carpet,  
carpet,  
carpet,  
lean around the bookcase—

My  
father with a small smile  
leaning toward the armchair,  
zipper on its way down,  
Angeline, her skirt tweaked,  
swelling closing one eye,  
pleading softly, no, no,

“NO!”

Dr. Feld is shock still.  
I take another lungful,

“NO!”

Angie slides to standing,  
gathering her book bag,  
running for the exit.

Raising brows, he mocks me,  
but, dammit, he will hear me,

“NO!”

Slamming by the bookcase  
tearing through the doorway  
pounding down the stairwell,  
no-no-no-no,  
NO-NO-NO.



She is gone when I get outside,  
so I'm running toward home  
along the railroad tracks,  
gym bag whacking my back,  
not smelling the oily rails,  
crows muted,  
sun dim,  
tunnel vision only two feet  
in front of my feet,

my only companion  
that shrill pitch above me,  
the one they use  
in movies  
when something terrible is revealed.



Throwing my gym bag down  
by the brook  
with a crunch of fine ice,  
I double over,  
dry heaves  
on my knees.

What did I see?  
What did I see in his office?

How could he, to  
poor Angeline?

I sink onto a rock near the water,  
taking a blood-red  
maple leaf  
and dunking it under,  
holding it beneath the frigid liquid.

Poor Angie.

She was supposed to be outside our

house of horrors  
and I let her in.  
I should have kept her away from him.  
He went outside.

And the tears burst through  
heavy as mercury,  
heated by guilt,  
and I take the leaf out of the water,  
sobbing.

Angeline,  
Angie,  
I'm sorry.



Trudging  
trudging up the driveway,  
patches of ice,  
Darren sweeping  
patches of wood chips.

"Go look out back,"  
he says with a jerk of his head,  
stamping the broom,  
and I am  
standing,  
staring . . .

"Go look," he says.

. . . then trudging  
past,  
saying nothing,  
peeling my coat  
to cool myself down.



From the dining room  
I gape at the backyard,  
suddenly so vast and bright  
even in twilight,

the old hemlock tree gone.

Stump and sawdust.  
Cut off at the knees.

"It had that disease,"  
Mom says,  
"it might have spread.  
The tree had to go."

I flash with incendiary anger at her.  
Then, pressing my forehead  
to the chilled glass of the sliding door,  
an ice block

forms in my chest.

My climbing tree.

My pinecone supply.

My hiding spot in the middle of the yard.

Gone.



Pushing open the bathroom door  
I take two steps toward Yaicha  
who is wrestling with her hair.

"I saw him hurt Angeline."

The brush stops moving.

"At his office today."

Small sounds

    like a dying cricket  
come from Yaicha's lips.

"I'm sure you were mistaken," she says  
    to her brush.

My ears pin back—

"*MISTAKEN?*

I know who Angie is, Yaicha.

I know who our father is, Yaicha.

He hurts people, he hurts you,

you never do anything!"  
My claws scrape the wall paint.

She turns with soft rabbit eyes.  
"He'll kill me."

"He's already doing that!"  
I am growling, grabbing her sleeve,  
"Every day,  
every day he rips you open,  
chips off pieces week by week,  
till a few years from now you are not even a  
mouthful of sawdust.  
A drawn-out killing.  
Well, I'm tired of all of us doing nothing.  
He has to be stopped."

Yaicha's eyes have flinched a few times  
but soften again.  
"Nobody can stop him."

My teeth show.

“Nobody can stop him?  
Good.  
To him I have always been  
Nobody.”



"No-no-no-no, Anke,  
What're you going to do . . . ?"  
Yaicha is whispering, pleading.

I storm outside  
to visit the stump  
and hear her hammer downstairs and streak  
out the garage to tell Darren.  
In a weird echo along the hedge  
I hear him say,  
"No, she can't. . . .  
Let's talk to mom."

And in the gathering night  
I stand on dying chips,  
stare at the new cut  
oozing plasma,  
sticky,  
drying in the chill.

The family secret,

carefully contained for years,  
out in the open air.

Now Yaicha and Darren are talking to mom  
in the living room.

I hear his car  
slow for the gravel turn  
at the bottom of the driveway  
and I head  
inside.



Where is the safe, cuddling daddy  
who  
sang "I'm Being Swallowed by a Boa  
Constrictor" to me

when I had a fever?

Was that man molted off  
like scales that no longer  
lie smoothly  
around the shape of what he has become?

I want my daddy back.

Too bad for me.



PART  
**FOUR**





They all swivel to me—  
Mom, Darren, and Yaicha—  
as I come through the sliding door.  
Mom's mouth opens  
then closes  
when the garage door  
goes up.

Then comes down.

Footfall,  
Darren frozen, eyes on the baseboard,  
Yaicha melted against the stereo cabinet,  
as he steps lightly up the stairs.

“Sorry I couldn’t give you  
a ride home,”  
he says to me,  
sliding into the living room  
with his briefcase,

"I had a meeting."

His eyes dare me.

Dare me.



Slow motion

twitching

twitching

hissing burning

blood pushing

itching skin

pushing out

something scary

pushing out

something stronger.



I stand behind his chair.  
"Liar,"  
under my breath.

His eyebrows rise,  
pupils sharpen.

"You weren't at a meeting,"  
take a breath, gain speed, bursting,  
"You were with Angie in the office.  
I saw you. I saw you.  
You clamp us down,  
you think no one knows.  
You hurt my brother! My sister!  
You hurt my friend! Small trusting prey, huh?  
You had to squash some weak person  
already in pain,  
thinking she loved you.  
You could have chosen to hurt *me*!"

But I'm not worth enough I never am and  
you picked poor Angie,  
you were going to RAPE her,  
I SAW YOU TRY TO RAPE ANGIE,  
you fucking MONSTER!"

I shove his chair forward  
with the force of my words,  
the wooden leg touches  
his foot.

Stillness. Shaking.

White-faced, cold,  
slowly  
he picks it up by the seat.

Suddenly spinning the chair in air  
he smashes it on me

hard—

with a great crack  
I go down,  
splinters of wood  
splinters of bone  
my leg showing bone,

and finally

I  
roar.



Coming out of anesthesia,  
throwing up  
as the doctor  
explains  
one rod, two plates, eight screws  
he planted  
in my leg bone.  
A recipe for repair.

"No duct tape?" I croak.

Leaning off the hospital bed,  
convulsing again.  
Throwing up  
feels  
strangely  
good.

In the sweeping blur  
the doctor's

purple high-tops  
swim into focus.

I can barely hear his grin.

"Nope, no duct tape."



The teeny card attached  
with a green Band-Aid on a heart  
says *from*  
*Coach Roy and Rona and the Team*  
in florist script.

An arrangement bursting  
with  
stripy-throated trumpety flowers  
the exact color of  
salmon sashimi.

Alstroemeria, Mom called them.

I am grinning.

My team.

My first real bouquet.



Mom perches  
on the gurney edge,  
flicking, straightening the beautiful  
one perfect  
flame-colored rose  
she brought.

*"I threw him out, Anke.  
Out."*

Softly, fiercely,  
she rips a petal.



He's been arrested.

In jail.

Such an odd disconnect

to feel so relieved  
and so guilty,

yet so cold about the whole thing,  
like concrete,  
like a nuclear reactor decommissioned  
and left by itself to withstand the  
winter.

I wonder if he has to wear one of those  
bar-striped suits.



I scootch up straighter.  
Mom props pillows  
and then they stand there,

Mom, stroking my hair,

Darren, staring at me

like he suddenly sees my eyes are brown,  
Yaicha, wearing pink, squeezing my toes,  
looking at me,  
then out the hospital window.

I am  
grateful they came,  
embarrassed they wanted to.

I want hugs,  
I want  
to ask them to leave,  
but when they finally go  
I am lonely  
again.



I can't be  
still  
in this antiseptic bed.

I knock my new  
shocking green cast  
against the metal rails  
even though it hurts  
to do it,  
rocking my leg  
back and forth, *whack*  
back and forth, *whack*  
back and forth, *whack*.

I did it.

back and forth, *whack*

I filed  
a restraining order  
against

my own father.

back and forth, *whack*

He's out on bail  
and needs more than restraining.

back and forth, *whack*, *WHACK*.

But it's  
a damn good  
start,  
and

I did it.



Angeline has a lawyer

and

I have a doctor

and

strong pain medication  
for where my bone  
punched through to the open air,  
a desperate method  
of escape,  
and I'm a little proud of it.

Angie has a therapist

too

and

they want one for me.

But I told them I need  
to think on my own  
first.



I am staring at the nothingness of the  
hospital room  
when a fluttering of yellow  
catches my eye.

Long fingers curve around the door frame  
waving a birch leaf.

I prop myself,  
grinning,  
wondering.  
“Hello?” I call.

Blond hair and one crinkled light brown eye  
show next to the doorjamb,  
then the rest of Kyler’s smiling face.

“Hey,” he says gently.

“Hey!” I say,

my heart skipping up in tempo.

Stepping into the room,  
Kyler reaches gingerly into the chest pocket of  
his flannel shirt,  
drawing out a handful of autumn leaves.

"For me?" I say gleefully,  
palms up for him to lay them on.

He sits easily on the side of the bed,  
watching me go through beech, oak, maple.

"I didn't know your favorite flower," he says,  
like it's an apology.

I raise the pile of leaves and breathe  
their scent,  
looking up into Kyler's eyes.

"These *are* my favorite," I say.



Lying spread eagle,  
anchored  
by my leg cast  
to the driveway  
still barely warm  
from an unseasonal day.

Staring into the starred darkness  
makes me feel  
stronger,  
a simple truth.

With all the  
dizzy galaxies  
hot gases  
dust at the speed of light  
neutrinos running through  
everything,

no matter how powerful someone is  
here on Earth

they are just as small as me  
to the vast greatness of  
outer  
space.



Strangely calm  
about missing the State Semi-Finals.

We lost.

It's too bad,  
but I secretly feel kind of proud  
that maybe we lost  
because  
I wasn't there.

And I'll be back next year.



An envelope  
under my door  
in the morning.

*Anke,*  
in my mother's  
small script.

Inside, a love letter:

*I am sorry I let you down.  
Your strength has always been immense,  
I think I believed your father  
needed me more.  
He is in such pain, and I chose not to  
see some things he did to feel better.  
Shielded by my love for him,  
I always did what I thought was best  
for my marriage—  
I see I failed you, my daughter.  
I sacrificed my children.  
Please help me*

*be a better mother to you now.  
I love you, I need you.*

And I am crying  
stumping out to the hall  
enveloping Mom in a smothering of  
pajama arms,  
pounding her shoulder with my fist,  
pounding,  
damn you,  
mingling tears,  
I love you, too.



I wish I could ask Yaicha  
what it was like  
what she was thinking  
what she was feeling  
what made her lie still  
while he hurt her so badly.

I wish I could  
but I don't know how to bring up  
such horrible questions.

Maybe they are none of my business.

Maybe she is wanting someone to ask.

Do I just open my mouth over homework,  
brushing teeth,  
folding laundry?

Do I just plunk myself on the edge of her bed  
one morning  
and ask?



I find myself crying all the time—  
right now,  
for instance.

It comes over me at the weirdest moments,  
like boiling water for tea  
or chopping wood for the fire.

At first I thought it was just leftover reaction.

But I feel like I'm breaking into a thousand  
random pieces, unsolvable.

And Darren is at the door of my bedroom  
with a sad face,  
and he comes and puts his arm around me—I  
can't remember when he's ever done that—

and I realize he loves me maybe and I haven't  
ruined the whole family and ripped us all  
to shreds and maybe they don't hate me and  
it'll be okay and now I'm crying even harder,  
sobbing on Darren,  
holding him around his neck  
like I'm ten years old,  
and he says

"Add some soap, you'd be a great washing  
machine."

and I am laughing and crying and I am so glad  
I have my brother.



The turkey seems way too big this year.

Did just one person  
take up  
that much table?

The steam leaks from a vent in the crackly skin  
just like a touched-up photo  
in *Chef's Fare*.  
But we are not in a magazine.

I thought maybe  
we'd all know what we're thankful for.  
He's *gone*, isn't he?



It was Yaicha's idea.  
Mom said,  
"Just the chair!"  
and something about pumpkin pie having gone  
to our heads.

But Darren finds a broken crate,  
leftover shingles,  
a branch of cedar,  
to jumpstart the bonfire,

so our father's teak armchair  
will really burn,  
burn completely away.

The fire howls to life,  
cedar sap snapping,  
and when it is so hot  
we have to shield our faces,  
Darren helps me throw on the chair,  
upholstery down,  
shattered frame to the blackening sky,

flames lapping  
three unbroken legs  
    awkward in the air.

The three of us let out a cheer  
dancing, me stumping, in a crazy circle  
fed by the blaze,

and Yaicha sings,  
"Ding-dong, the wicked witch is dead!"



And then the silliness stops.

Yaicha

Darren

and I

are standing

with our scarves to our noses,

saying nothing

thinking everything

eyes glued to the pulsing core of the fire.

I nudge

a burning twig with my toe,

reflecting

on my father himself.

I have loved him,

feared him,

loathed him,

for so long.

But what does he have

to give me

now

that I would actually want?

The final chair leg tumbles  
to the coals,

and I can't come up with  
one  
thing.



Yaicha and I  
sit against the big hemlock stump  
heads nearly touching  
through the feathery needled sprout  
between us.

Darren is silhouetted,  
standing,  
arms folded,  
facing the fire.

"Come sit with us,"  
I tell him,  
patting the ground  
like he's a small child.

And he comes!  
He sits on my other side,  
arm around the scratchy bark,

throwing tiny chips into the coals.

Three of us,  
facing the embers,  
leaning on the scent  
of fresh-sawn wood.



They head into the house,  
Darren patting my shoulder,  
Yaicha touching my hair.

Resting my cast on a smoldering shingle  
I stare into coals,  
eyelids drying,  
small pulsing flames emblazoned on my vision  
when I finally blink.

I shiver  
with contrasts  
like the planet Mercury,  
    one side boiling  
    one side frozen

and here I am crying again  
because that sounds so lonely,  
I am tired of  
being lonely,  
so done with

being lonely.

And yes!

I *am* done with being lonely  
because there,  
sticking their heads out the sliding-glass door  
are my mother,  
my brother,  
my sister,  
calling me

“Come in!”

“It’s cold out there alone!”

“We’re making hot chocolate!”

Wrapped in a grin,  
I douse the last embers  
and turn on my cast  
away from ashes.

Toward offered afghan.

Toward mug of frothy warmth.

Toward my family.







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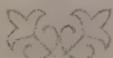
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Rick Carter



## THALIA CHALTAS

wanted to do everything when she was a teenager,

and she envied people who knew without question what their life goal was. Thalia did preliminary training to be a kinesiologist, a helicopter pilot, and a firefighter, and has at times been a bus driver, a ropes course instructor, and a contralto in an a cappella group. Along the way she has played lots of volleyball, written poetry, and collected children's books. And eventually, that anvil fell from the sky and she realized writing was what all this previous intensive training was for. Thalia has kept every poem she has ever written, except one. Because she can't find it. She lives in California with her daughter. *Because I Am Furniture* is her first novel. Visit her Web site at [www.thaliachaltas.com](http://www.thaliachaltas.com).

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"TAUT AND COMPELLING, *Because I Am Furniture* explores the often-hidden anguish of the family member who is witness to cruelty but unable to stop it. Just as important, this book shows what it takes to go from someone who must stand by and watch to someone who must stand up and do something."

— Patricia McCormick, author of the National Book Award Finalist *Sold*



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